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Ten Studies in the Psalms

John Edgar McFadyen

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TEN STUDIES IN THE PSALMS

BY
JOHN EDGAR MCFADYEN, M.A. (Glas.), B.A. (Oxon.)
Professor of Old Testament Literature and Exegesis,
Free Church College, Glasgow

"My hope is in Thee,
My refuge and my fortress,
My God, in whom I trust."
—*(Ps. xxxix, 7; xci, 2.)*

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Preface

THERE is, perhaps, no part of the Old Testament which speaks so simply and directly to the universal heart as the Psalter. Yet even the most familiar psalms come home to us with increased freshness and power when, by sympathetic study, we have traveled back to the world in which their writers stood, and learned to look out upon it with their eyes. The short studies in this volume are an attempt to interpret, in this way, a few of the psalms that deal with important aspects of the religious life, and to show their vital bearing upon the life of to-day. In their doubts, struggles, and aspirations, those ancient men are very near us, and they speak to us with an accent that is strangely modern. I have tried to make this plain in the course of the exposition, and to illustrate their kinship with us by quotation from modern writers.

The treatment of the psalms here selected is expository. But, without being didactic or homiletic, I have at the same time sought to make it practically helpful, by gathering up the study of each psalm in a series of personal questions, which are intended both to carry the reader into the heart of the psalm, and also to enable him to search his own inner life.

I desire here to express my obligation to Messrs. Charles Scribner's Sons for their generous courtesy in allowing me to reprint, from my volume on *The Messages of the Psalmists* in *The Messages of the Bible Series* (1904), the paraphrase of the psalms here selected for study.

JOHN E. MCFADYEN.

Lake of Bays, Muskoka, August, 1907.

STUDY I

The First Psalm

First Day: The Text of the Psalm

O how abundantly happy is the man who never has walked as wicked
men have counselled,
Nor stood in the way frequented by sinners,
Nor taken his seat in a session of scoffers;
But whose delight is in the fear of Jehovah,
And who broods over his law day and night!
He is like a tree planted by water-courses,
That brings forth its fruit when it is due,
And its leaves do not wither;
All that he does he brings to a happy end.

Not so do the wicked fare, not so;
But like chaff are they, driven by the wind.
Therefore the wicked shall not stand in the judgment,
Nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous.
For, while Jehovah cares for the way of the righteous,
The way of the wicked shall perish.

1. Commit the psalm to memory in any version you please.
2. Meditate upon it carefully, and without the aid of books, until you have some adequate idea of it, in detail and as a whole.

SECOND DAY: The Character and Destiny of Good Men (Verses 1-3)

1. The first psalm has been fittingly called the prologue to the Psalter, and it was by a happy inspiration that this psalm was chosen to introduce the book. In the Psalter many voices are heard —voices of doubt and sorrow—from men whose faith was strained and whose hearts were breaking; from men whose "steps had well nigh slipped" (Ps. 73:2), and whose soul was cast down and disquieted within them (Ps. 42:11). The first psalm is the answer, by anticipation, to all these laments; it expresses in advance the assurance that, despite all seeming, it is well with good men, and that their fortunes are watched over by God.

2. The first verse describes the good man negatively; the second, positively; the third is a picture of his bright destiny. The opening word in the Hebrew announces not so much his inward blessedness as his outward prosperity; not so much "Blessed" as "O how full of happiness!"—the happiness being more particularly described by verses 3 and 6. The man who deserves and will obtain this happiness is, first of all, he who refuses to have anything to do with bad men. The bad men whom the Psalmist has particularly in view were probably apostate Jews, who had come under the influence of Greek culture, and turned their backs upon the Jewish faith. The three words used to describe them and also the Psalmist's attitude towards them constitute a fine and no doubt intentional climax. They are (1) wicked or ungodly; (2) continual and, as it were, professional sinners; (3) scoffers, men who in their gatherings—"clubs," we might almost say—deliberately ridicule religion, its beliefs, its duties, its consolations, its adherents. In the good man's attitude to these fatal influences there is a similar climax: walking, standing, sitting—each act more deliberate than the last. These words suggest the decline and fall of a human soul. The man who deliberately joins a club of those who meet to mock at religion and deny the moral order, is far on the road to ruin (verse 6).

3. As, negatively, the good man avoids bad company, so, positively, he is a religious man; "his delight is in the *fear of Jehovah*," as we should probably read; and he nourishes his religious life on the Scriptures—here called "the law of Jehovah." On this he muses, meditates, half aloud and half to himself, by day when he is at work, and at night, after he has come home.

4. Such a man is like a tree, deep-rooted, well-watered, fruitful and fair—a very striking picture to one who remembers how dry and parched was much of the land of Palestine. Like such a tree the good man flourishes in all his enterprise.

THIRD DAY: The Fate of Bad Men (Verses 4-6)

1. The Psalmist gives no detailed description of the bad man as he had done of the good; such a theme is uncongenial. He describes not the man's character, but his fate. And he begins with a solemn and emphatic negative: "not so fare the wicked." After his lovely description of the green and fruitful tree, he continues with an almost terrible simplicity—the fate of the wicked is not like that; no such destiny is in store for them.

2. They are not like the tree, but they are like the chaff. What a contrast! The tree, substantial and fruitful; the chaff, empty and useless. But the particular contrast in the Psalmist's mind is between the permanence of the one and the transience of the other. The tree stands, not only fair because fed from the waters, but firm because deep-rooted in the ground; the chaff is driven to and fro by the wind. As the tree stands when the winds begin to blow, so shall the righteous stand when the judgment comes; but not the wicked—they shall be, as it were, blown like the chaff from off the face of the world. By the judgment the Psalmist does not mean one of the many great crises in history, though there would be a large measure of truth in saying that in these successive judgments the wicked do not stand; rather he is thinking of the great Messianic judgment, which was to purge the earth of the wicked, and leave the "congregation of the righteous" unvexed and untainted by their presence.

3. The psalm closes with the assurance that the destinies of men are determined by God. He is interested in, not indifferent to, the moral attitude of men; and so he knows, that is, continually cares for, watches over, the way that the righteous go—and that is an everlasting way (Ps. 139:24); while he will see to it that the way of the wicked shall die out upon the path of history, as the tracks of the caravan wheels die out upon the desert sands (cf. Job 6:18). The last verse sums up the whole psalm, but the emphasis falls particularly on the last clause, as the latter half of the psalm is dealing with the fate of the wicked; hence the translation on page 3.

Fourth Day: The Message of the Psalm for Us

1. There are many incidental suggestions of much interest and importance in the psalm, such as the gradual decline of a soul that has entered upon the path of wickedness; but two thoughts stand out above all the others: that the difference in the characters of men will be matched by a difference in their destinies, and that the study of Scripture must be an element in, as it is a support of, the good life.

2. The Psalmist does not recognize shades of distinction in human character; he divides men sharply into two classes, the righteous and the wicked. And he affirms that the former prosper, while the latter perish; if that be not obvious now, if in the meantime sinners do stand in the congregation of the righteous, at any rate it will be obvious enough in the judgment. The Psalmist has no doubt about that: the wind cannot blow away the tree, but it can and will most certainly blow away the chaff. Even apart from the Psalmist's thought of the final Messianic judgment, there is a profound and valuable thought in these simple comparisons with the tree and the chaff. It is this: goodness is permanent, it stands as part of the eternal order, watched over and conserved by God; evil is impermanent, there can be no ultimate place for it in the universe of God. The Psalmist is very earnest about this; he states it graphically twice; once in comparing the wicked to chaff that is blown hither and thither (wickedness has no *root* in the universe), and again, in asserting that the way of the wicked dies out. The Psalmist pictorially suggests, rather than definitely teaches, that goodness is the pathway to eternal life, while wickedness is the sure road to oblivion in the ultimate count of things.

3. One mark of the good man is an earnest and continual study of the Scriptures. When this psalm was written, probably a very large part of the Old Testament was already in existence; but, if we may judge by the nineteenth and the one hundred and nineteenth psalms, the writer was thinking more particularly of the law—what we now call the Pentateuch. It is very significant, however, that the study of the Scriptures, whether in larger or smaller compass, is the one positive mark of the good man mentioned in the psalm. By this he lives. Scripture plays the same part in his life and growth as the water in the life and growth of the tree that is planted by the water-courses. As the life-giving water brings out the leaves and fruit upon the tree, so Scripture brings beauty and fruitfulness into the life of the man who muses upon it day and night.

Fifth Day: Paraphrase of the Psalm

The truly happy man is he who never entered on the perilous path of godlessness—that path which begins in dallying with evil, and leads by sure steps to the deliberate scorn of religion. But his heart is set upon the Scriptures, and over them he broods continually. The destiny of such an one is bright—like a tree, fruitful and fair, with roots that are nourished by water from the rivulets, and leaves that never fade. All that he does he brings to a happy issue.

Far other is the destiny of the godless. They are light as the chaff blown about by the wind; and when the winds of judgment begin to blow, they shall not be able to keep their feet, nor shall they have any place in the assembly of the righteous. For, while Jehovah watches over the way that the righteous takes, the way of the godless vanishes out of sight.

Explain to yourself every phrase of the psalm in thoroughly modern and unconventional language.

The success of your effort will be best tested by writing a paraphrase of your own.

Sixth Day: General Questions

1. What is the ideal of piety in this psalm?

2. Do you consider this ideal exhaustive? If not, how would you supplement it?

3. Is the study of Scripture essential to piety?

4. Which Scriptures contribute most?

5. If to the Psalmist the law of God was pre-eminently the Pentateuch, and in particular its "precepts and statutes" (cf. Ps. 119:4, 5), in what parts does that law receive its highest expression?

6. How far is the correspondence between the character and fortunes of men observable in this world?

7. What is the ground for the general belief in its ultimate exact correspondence?

8. "Blessed is the man that trusteth in Jehovah, and whose trust Jehovah is. He shall be like a tree planted by the waters, that spreadeth out its roots by the river. Its leaf shall be green, and it shall not cease from yielding fruit." (Jeremiah 17:7, 8.)

Assuming that there is a literary connection between this passage and the psalm, contrast the types of piety presented by both—the one rooted in trust on God, the other in a study of the Scriptures. Is there any necessary incompatibility between them?

SEVENTH DAY: Personal Questions and Points for Consideration

1. What is your personal attitude to influences that are perilous to your moral life?

2. Do you gladly embrace every opportunity for the study of Scripture?

3. What has your previous study of the Scripture done for your moral and religious life?

4. As you consider your life-history thus far, can you point to evidence that God watches over the way that you take?

5. If one whose Bible was only part of the Old Testament regarded the study of it as a matter of such high and serious importance, how much more loving and earnest should our study be who have a New Testament as well as an Old, with its wonderful story of Jesus, with its great words of inspiration and consolation, with its Luke 15, John 14, 1 Corinthians 13, Revelations 22.

6. "The first psalm may be said to bestow a blessing on the literary study of the Bible."—*R. G. Moulton,* Literary Study of the Bible, ch. vi.

7. "A man's character *is* by far the most important part of his destiny."—*Joseph McFadyen.*

8. "At first sight, nothing can well appear more unnatural and defiant of all fact than this dual classification [into only two classes, of good and bad, friends and enemies of God]. The moment you attempt to apply it to actual persons, and to walk through the world parting, as you go, the sheep from the goats, you perceive how little it answers to any apparent reality, and how shocking the effect would be of running it sharply through life. The varieties of character, and the degrees of faithfulness, are infinite, and are discriminated from each other by the finest shades. * * * Yet, strange to say, this doctrine, seemingly so harsh in itself and so impossible to confront with experience, has by no means been a mere favourite with the rude multitude; it has had the most powerful hold of minds capacious, philosophical, harmonious, devout, and has rarely failed to throw its awful shadow across the holiest souls. Evaded and explained away by mediocre men and in rationalistic times, it is gazed at with full face by a Plato, a Dante, a Milton, a Pascal; and surely has no ambiguous expression in the records of our faith. How is this contradiction to be resolved? I reply: by turning from the outward to the inward look of moral evil."—*Martineau,* Types of Ethical Theory, Book II, ch. I:ii (4).

STUDY II

The Eleventh Psalm

First Day: The Text of the Psalm

In Jehovah have I taken refuge:
How can ye say to me,
"Flee to the mountains like a bird?
For, see! the wicked are bending the bow,
They have fixed their arrow on the string,
To shoot in the dark at the upright in heart.
When the foundations are being torn down,
What has the righteous accomplished?"

Jehovah is in his holy temple,
Jehovah—his throne is in heaven,
His eyes behold the world,
His eyelids test the children of men.
Jehovah tests the righteous and the wicked,
The lover of violence he hates from his soul.
He will rain upon the wicked coals of fire and brimstone,
A scorching wind shall be the portion of their cup.

For Jehovah is righteous; righteous deeds he loveth:
The upright shall behold his face.

1. Commit the psalm to memory in any version you please.
2. Meditate upon it carefully, and without the aid of books, until you have some adequate idea of it, in detail and as a whole.

SECOND DAY: The Temptation to Cowardice (Verses 1-3)

1. This powerful little psalm is not properly understood until it is recognized that the first three verses constitute the cowardly advice given by his supporters to some man of faith, while the rest of the psalm is his triumphant answer. We have no means of ascertaining the historical occasion of the psalm; all we know is that the situation is desperate. Society is being shaken to its foundations; its worthier members, "the upright in heart," are losing hope; their opponents are powerful, cruel and treacherous.

2. But there is one brave, strong man, who, amid the welter and confusion, stands firm as a rock, and repudiates with indignation the faithless and cowardly counsel of his supporters. The source and basis of his confidence he expresses in the very first word of his confession: "*In Jehovah* have I taken refuge." That was why he scorned to flee, as he was urged, to the mountains, like a bird. For centuries the mountains had been the refuge of the persecuted; but the Psalmist stood his ground, because he felt himself already secure in his God. Flight would have meant infidelity. Even the graphic picture of the cruel and treacherous designs of his enemies is powerless to make him swerve from his post or his God. For, see! the wicked have their bow and arrow ready to let drive at his honest heart; but look again! Jehovah is in his heavens, and the Psalmist is sure that he will protect the man who puts his trust in him.

3. The last appeal of the cowards is the subtlest of all. They point out that the foundations, the pillars of social law and order, are already being torn down, and ask their steadfast, righteous chief, with sad earnestness, what, after all, his righteousness has enabled him to accomplish. The world is tumbling to pieces, and he can only succeed in being buried beneath the ruins. So far was righteousness from being victorious that it had not even been able to avert disaster.

THIRD DAY: The Triumphant Answer of Faith (Verses 4-7)

1. The secret of the Psalmist's steadfastness is to be found in the first word of his answer to the cowardly plea for flight. It is *Jehovah,* twice repeated. He lifts his eyes from earth to heaven, from the wicked with their bows bent and arrows strung, to his God who, above the vexations and confusions of this world, sits secure upon his heavenly throne, intently watching all that goes on below, and ready to wield his terrible power in defence of the outraged moral order.

2. God is not indifferent or blind, as persecuted men may be tempted to suppose: "his eyes behold." And not merely behold, but narrowly behold—"his eyelids scrutinize, test, the children of men." Yes, Jehovah—for the third time—tests the righteous and the wicked. He does not merely see, he cares; how deeply, will be seen from the passion with which he loves and rewards the one (verse 7), and hates and destroys the other (verses 5, 6). We must not forget that we are reading the Old Testament.

3. The last two verses describe in graphic terms the destiny reserved for both. The fate of the wicked shall be like that which overtook Sodom—fire and brimstone (Gen. 19:24). Jehovah is lord of the elements, and from his throne in the heavens he will pour down his fiery rain upon the evil-doers; the glowing wind will be their portion—here poetically represented as a draught to be drunk. So the Psalmist's faith is justified. His God was the mighty wielder of lightning and thunder, fire and wind; why then should he fear the miserable bows and arrows of his puny opponents?

4. God is pledged by his very nature thus to defend the moral order; for *he is righteous,* and therefore necessarily *loves deeds of righteousness,* whether we are to understand by these the deeds of the men who are faithful to him, or his own. He loves to see men do them, and he loves to do them himself. So just as surely as he will punish the wicked, will he reward the good; and the reward will take the form of a vision of himself. It is not said how he will manifest himself; the idea may be that in the defeat of the wicked and the triumph of the good, those who have eyes to see may behold God himself. He reveals himself conspicuously in the crises of history.

Fourth Day: The Message of the Psalm for Us

1. This too little known psalm strikingly illustrates the intimate connection between courage and faith. The Psalmist refuses to flee, because he knows that he is safe where he is. He refuses to be terrified by the powerful and treacherous assaults of earth, because he knows that he can count on the invisible resources of heaven.

2. Conversely, cowardice is, in the last analysis, a lack of confidence in God. The coward is one who has no vision of God upon his throne. The sight of the deadly arrow upon the bow-string strikes a chill into his heart, because he has no deep faith that the destinies of men are in the hands of God. He runs because he cannot stand; he cannot stand because he has no sense of divine support. As his refuge is not in the invisible God, he must find it in some visible thing, like the mountains. To abandon one's post is therefore, in one aspect, to abandon one's faith in God. Cowardice is faithlessness.

3. The foundations of the world are well and deeply laid and there need be no fear of their ultimate destruction. God is in heaven, watching and guiding the great historical movements, bringing order out of confusion, and quiet after storm. What, therefore, are bows bent by the wicked and arrows set upon the string for their cruel flight, to him on whose side fights the God of the storm? What is the darkness that seems to shield schemes of wickedness to him on whom streams light from God's own face? What is the seeming shattering of foundations to him whose foundation is God?

FIFTH DAY: Paraphrase of the Psalm

My God is my refuge. Why then do ye tell me to flee, like a bird, for refuge to the hills? Ye seek to make me play the coward. Look, ye tell me, the godless are just about to shoot. They are bending their bow. Their arrow is already on the string, to be secretly shot at the upright. The pillars of law and order are being torn down; and what has the good man, for all his virtue, been able to accomplish?

Such is your cowardly speech; but it does not affright me. For my God is just and omnipotent; he sits enthroned in his heavenly palace. His eyes wander over the earth; he watches and weighs the deeds of men—of the good and the bad alike; and to each he will give his due reward. With the champions of wrong, whom he hates, he will deal as he dealt with Sodom and Gomorrah, raining coals of fire and brimstone upon them, and pursuing them with the hot breath of the desert wind.

But a gracious destiny awaits the upright; for the faithful Jehovah loves to show himself faithful, and for reward they shall behold his face.

Explain to yourself every phrase of the psalm in thoroughly modern and unconventional language.

The success of your effort will best be tested by writing a paraphrase of your own.

Sixth Day: Personal and General Questions

1. Have you ever been confronted with the temptation to cowardice? If so, how have you met it?

2. You confess in church: "I believe in God the Father *Almighty.*" Do you really believe this?

3. What is your attitude to malicious or treacherous opposition?

4. Is there any element in the national or international situation to-day that tends to shake your faith? If so, in what direction would you look for the strengthening of that faith?

5. From your knowledge of history, ancient or modern, show how such a confidence as the Psalmist had has been justified.

SEVENTH DAY: Points for Consideration

1. "If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?" This question of the Authorized Version—true to the spirit, though not to the letter, of the Hebrew—is often anxiously asked by good men who are afraid of the progress of Biblical criticism, and other supposedly dangerous tendencies of modern life and thought; but note that *it is a coward's question.* The true man of faith has his answer ready:

> "Jehovah is in his holy temple,
> Jehovah—his throne is in heaven."

2. "I will build my church; and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it."—*Matthew* 16: 18.

3. In sight of Worms, Luther's friends most earnestly entreated him to return. "I will go on," he said, "though there were as many devils set against me as there are red tiles on yonder houses."

4. "A safe stronghold our God is still,
A trusty shield and weapon."—*Luther.*

5. "God's in his heaven—
All's right with the world."—*Browning.*

It is easy to believe this, when

> "The year's at the spring
> And day's at the morn;
> Morning's at seven;
> The hill-side's dew-pearled;
> The lark's on the wing;
> The snail's on the thorn."

But the true test of faith is that one should still cherish this belief, when "the wicked are bending their bow, and have set their arrow upon the string, to shoot in the dark at the upright in heart."

STUDY III

The Twenty-third Psalm

First Day: The Text of the Psalm

Jehovah is shepherding me: I want for nothing.
In grassy pastures he makes me lie down;
To waters of rest he guides me.
He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths that are straight,
For his name's sake.
Yes; though I walk through a vale of deep gloom,
I will fear no ill;
For *Thou* art with me,
Thy rod and Thy staff—
They are my comfort.

Thou preparest a table before me
In the presence of my foes.
Thou hast anointed my head with oil,
My cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and kindness shall pursue me
All the days of my life;
And I shall dwell in the house of Jehovah
Throughout the length of days.

1. Commit the psalm to memory in any version you please.
2. Meditate upon it carefully, and without the aid of books, until you have some adequate idea of it, in detail and as a whole.

Second Day: God as Shepherd (Verses 1-4)

1. The quiet beauty and simplicity of this psalm are apt to hide from us its real range and depth. Its writer knew of grassy pastures and restful waters; but he had also enemies to face, and he knew what it was to walk through valleys of gloom. It was not for nothing that the rod was in the shepherd's hand: it was to beat off the assaults that threatened the peace and the life of his sheep. The eyes that beheld with sweet satisfaction the rod and the staff had often looked upon trouble; and the consolation was real because the sorrow had been real.

2. The Psalmist knows life, its struggles and its gloom, its perils of the darkness and its perils from the foe; but he is able to sing us his immortal song, because he also knows God. He thinks of himself—in imagery long familiar to Israel—as a silly sheep, apt to wander away upon devious and dangerous paths, hungering for the green grass and thirsting for the fresh water, and losing himself at times in deep and gloomy ravines. But he thinks of his God as his Shepherd, who knows where the straight paths lie, and who brings him out upon them; who knows where the grass and the water are, and who gently guides him up to them. The wilderness of life has its sweet refreshing spots: the good Shepherd will lead his sheep thither, and there he will make them lie down, to rest and refresh themselves.

3. But men, like sheep, need more than food and rest. In the gloomy ravines there lurks danger: robbers and wild beasts are ever ready to pounce upon their helpless and unsuspecting prey, and the poor sheep needs protection. This she finds in her shepherd, who not only provides for her need, but is her defence against attack. The danger may be real, but so is the shepherd. "*Thou* art with me." And the shepherd is as powerful as he is tender; for he carries in his hand a great oak club to beat off the wild beasts. Even to-day "many adventures with wild beasts occur, not unlike that recounted by David (1 Sam. 17: 34-36); for though there are now no lions here, there are wolves in abundance; and leopards and panthers, exceeding fierce, prowl about these wild wadies. They not unfrequently attack the flock in the very presence of the shepherd, and he must be ready to do battle at a moment's warning."—(*Thomson,* The Land and the Book.) The staff is different from the rod: on it the shepherd leans; with it in various ways he helps his sheep. So that rod and staff together symbolize the power and the affection of the divine Shepherd. Well might the Psalmist point to them with pride and gladness, and say: "*They* are my consolation."

THIRD DAY: God as Host (Verses 5, 6)

1. In the first part of the psalm God was the shepherd, and man was a sheep. But man is more than a sheep. He who can look up into the face of God and say, "*Thou* art with *me*," is God's friend; and whether the figure of God as shepherd be retained in the second half of the psalm or no, at any rate the Psalmist describes himself in more human and less pastoral terms.

2. He is a man who has enemies—hunted relentlessly by the blood-avenger across the cruel desert till he reaches the kindly shelter of a tent. Once there, by a great and beneficent law of Arab hospitality, he is safe. "That the guest is inviolable is one of the first principles of Arab hospitality. To be safe, the stranger needs but enter the tent, or only touch a tent rope; then, even if he be an enemy, no hand will be raised against him. To fall upon one seeking shelter in his tent would stain an Arab's name with everlasting dishonor." The enemies, then, are powerless to lay a finger upon the Psalmist. They may stand at the tent-door and glare in upon him; but within the tent, his protection is guaranteed by his divine Host.

3. And not only bare protection, but abundant hospitality. His head is anointed with oil, as was the custom in the East before a banquet—how unlike the reception accorded to Jesus by the haughty Pharisee! (Luke 7:46). He is guest at the table spread; he drinks of a full and exhilarating cup.

4. So real and overwhelming is his sense of the divine hospitality that he feels sure he shall enjoy it as long as he lives. The language in which he expresses this confidence is enthusiastic to the point of daring. "Surely goodness and kindness shall—not merely follow me, but—*pursue* me all the days of my life." The word is that used for the pursuit of the enemy in battle; and goodness and mercy, like two angel spirits, are chasing him, as it were—in hot haste after him, divinely determined to capture him.

5. How sure he must have been of the divine love! Is it any wonder that he wished to enjoy forever the shelter and hospitality of that gracious tent, or that he vowed, "I shall dwell in the house of Jehovah throughout the length of days"?

FOURTH DAY: The Message of the Psalm for Us

1. There is no psalm on which it is so supremely difficult to comment as this. Its tender beauty eludes analysis, and its teaching was never meant for systematization. The attempt to assign a definite meaning to the "green pastures," the "waters of rest," or the "gloomy valley," would be both prosaic and futile. Here more than anywhere else must the reader interpret for himself out of his own experience. The glory of the psalm lies in its power to suggest to each reader an application which suits his own experience.

2. It is full of the sense that life is haunted by a presence. We may be travelling through the great and terrible wilderness; but its terrors vanish for him who can say, *"Thou* art with *me."* We are indeed silly sheep, but not shepherdless. Here and there as we look across our life we see green and happy spots where we were refreshed, renewed, restored. In our best moments we know that it was the good Shepherd who took us there, and we might have been there far oftener had we given up our lives to his leading and guiding; for the paths on which he leads us are not crooked but straight. And if we are willing to follow, he is pledged to guide us, for his own name's sake. He must be true to his sheep as to himself.

3. Very remarkable is the thought in verse 6 of God's pursuit of men. The Psalmist could have used no stronger word to express the earnestness of God's affection for us. "He pursues us with the zeal of a foe, and the love of a Father; pursues us 'throughout the length of days' with a divine impatience that is never faint and never weary. He is not content to follow us: he pursues us, because he means to find us. Behind the loneliest man is a lovely apparition; nay, no apparition, but angels twain, 'Goodness and Mercy.' Had the powers that pursued us not been goodness and mercy they would have slain us long ago as cumberers of the ground."[1]

4. This psalm is not a prayer, but a confession of faith. The writer does not pray to be led to the green pastures and the restful waters; he is there already. He does not pray for the divine protection, as he passes through the gloomy valleys; he enjoys it already. He does not pray that he may be fed by the divine bounty; already the table is spread and his cup is running over. He has an unbroken sense of the divine goodness that filled the past, and will assuredly fill the future. He has heard the voice of his heavenly Father—though perhaps he has not yet learned to call him Father—saying:

> "Child, thou art ever with me,
> And all that is mine is thine."—(*Luke* 15:31).

[1]See my *Divine Pursuit* (Revell, 1901), pp. 197, 198.

Fifth Day: Paraphrase of the Psalm

Like a good shepherd, my God is always caring for me, so that I lack for nothing. He guides me to sources of renewal and rest, making me lie down in pastures green, and leading me to waters of quietness. My weary spirit he refreshes; he guides me in paths that are straight, for the glory of his name. Yea, and he can guide me in the darkness as in the light. For, even when I walk in the valley of the deep shadow, I fear no ill; for thou art with me, to guide and defend me. Thy rod and thy staff are my comfort.

Thou art, too, my host, as well as my shepherd, and at thy hospitable table I feast without fear, though mine enemies glare in upon me. Thou anointest my head for the banquet, and the gifts of thy table are abundant. Surely goodness and mercy, angels twain, shall follow close after me all my days, and I shall dwell forever in the house of my God.

Explain to yourself every phrase of the psalm in thoroughly modern and unconventional language.

The success of your effort will be best tested by writing a paraphrase of your own.

Sixth Day: Points for Consideration

1. Does this psalm seem to you the work of youth or of a matured and checkered experience?

2. (*a*) "Psalm 23 expresses calm confidence in Jehovah: (1) as shepherd, providing his sheep with plentiful pasture and water (verses 1-3); (2) as guide, conducting his companion safely in right paths through a gloomy ravine (verses 3, 4); (3) as host, anointing his guest for the banquet and granting him perpetual hospitality. * * * (verses 5, 6). It is a mistake to suppose that the theme of the shepherd extends into the second strophe. * * * In strophe iii the host takes the place of the shepherd and the guide of the previous strophes."—*C. A. Briggs.*

(*b*) "The twenty-third psalm seems to break in two at the end of the fourth verse. The first four verses clearly reflect a pastoral scene; the fifth appears to carry us off, without warning, to very different associations. This, however, is only in appearance. The last two verses are as pastoral as the first four. If these show us the shepherd with his sheep upon the pasture, those follow him, shepherd still, to where in his tent he dispenses the desert's hospitality to some poor fugitive from blood."—*George Adam Smith.*

(*c*) "It is all, all a simple shepherd psalm. See how it runs through the round of shepherd life from first word to last. * * * The psalm closes with the last scene of the day. At the door of the sheepfold the shepherd stands. With his rod he holds back the sheep while he inspects them one by one as they pass into the fold. He has the horn filled with olive oil, and he has cedar-tar, and he anoints a knee bruised on the rocks, or a side scratched by thorns. And here comes one that is not bruised, but is simply worn and exhausted; he bathes its face and head with the refreshing olive oil, and he takes the large two-handled cup and dips it brimming full from the vessel of water provided for that purpose, and he lets the weary sheep drink. There is nothing finer in the psalm than this. God's care is not for the wounded only, but for the worn and weary also. 'He anointeth my head with oil, my cup runneth over.' "—*The Song of Our Syrian Guest.*

Consider carefully the above interpretations of the psalm. Which do you prefer, and why?

3. "On either side of the river was also a meadow, curiously beautified with lilies, and it was green all the year long. In this meadow they lay down and slept; for here they might lie down safely."—*The Pilgrim's Progress.*

4. Compare the following versions of Psalm 23:6 with each other and with the original:

Goodness and mercy all my life
Shall surely follow me;
And in God's house for evermore
My dwelling-place shall be.
—*Scotch Metrical Version.*

O nought but love and mercy wait
Through all my life on me,
And I within my Father's gate
For long bright years shall be. —*Keble.*

And so through all the length of days
Thy goodness faileth never:
Good Shepherd, may I sing thy praise
Within thy house forever. —*Baker.*

Seventh Day: Thoughts and Questions

1. How do you account for the extraordinary power and popularity of this psalm?

2. Has the psalm ever spoken to you with special power? Recall such occasions.

3. Like the Lord's prayer, the Twenty-third Psalm is appropriate to every stage of religious development. A child can understand it, but the wisest cannot exhaust its depths. As we grow, it grows; we never leave it behind.

4. "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:11). How rich and definite a meaning flows into the ancient words of the psalm, when we think of Jesus as our Shepherd! Carefully re-read the psalm with this thought in view.

5. "In the *valley of the shadow of death* I will fear no evil." Note that the correct translation, "the valley of deep gloom, the valley of the deep shadow," is really more comprehensive than the other and more familiar phrase. The Psalmist is expressing his faith in the presence of the divine Companion, not only in the valley of death, but in every valley through which he may have to pass, before he reaches the last and darkest of all.

6. "I will dwell in the house of the Lord *forever*." The Hebrew words mean literally "for length of days"; and the first clause of the verse shows that the Psalmist is thinking of the days of his own lifetime. Yet the thought "forever" is a natural and legitimate expansion of the general thought of the psalm. Men who had learned to know God in this life as their Shepherd, Host, and Friend, came little by little to feel sure that not even death could separate them from his love. He was eternal, and they were in him.

STUDY IV

The Thirty-ninth Psalm

First Day: The Text of the Psalm

I said, "I will watch my ways,
  To keep from sinning with my tongue.
I will put a bridle on my mouth,
  So long as the wicked are before me."
I was dumb and silent,
  I utterly held my peace;
  But my pain was stirred up.
My heart became hot in my bosom,
  As I mused, the fire kindled,
  And at last I spake with my tongue.

Teach me, Jehovah, mine end,
  And the measure of my days—what it is;
  Let me know how frail I am.
See! Thou hast made my days but a span,
  And my life is as nothing before thee.
Refrain—Ah! surely as a breath doth every man stand.

Ah! surely in mere semblance man walketh about,
  Surely his noise is all for nothing.
  He heaps up, and knows not who shall gather.

And now what wait I for, O Lord?
  My hope is in thee.
From all my transgressions deliver me,
  Make me not the scorn of the fool.
I am dumb, I open not my mouth;
  For it is thou that hast done it.
Oh! take thy stroke away from me,
  By the might of thy hand I am clean spent. Ah me!
When with rebukes for sin thou dost chasten a man,
  Thou wastest, like a moth, his beauty.
Refrain—Ah! surely every man is but a breath.

Oh! hear my prayer, Jehovah, and hearken to my cry for help,
  Hold not thy peace at my tears;
For a guest am I with thee,
  And a sojourner, like all my fathers.
Look away from me, that I may smile again,
  Ere I go away, and be no more.

Meditate upon the psalm carefully, and without the aid of books, until you have some adequate idea of it, in detail and as a whole.

Second Day: The Pathos of Life (Verses 1-6)

1. Ewald has called this psalm "incontestably the finest of all the elegies in the Psalter." Brief as it is, it reflects a variety of moods —patience and anger, regret and resignation, murmuring and faith. The Psalmist has the skill to give us, in a word or two, a glimpse into the depths of his hot and troubled heart.

2. His lot has been an unhappy one. Like many a saint whose voice is heard in the Old Testament, he had had to suffer sorely, so sorely that he had been tempted to murmur and to challenge, like Jeremiah (12:1), the divine government of the world. But he had determined to keep silence, and he had kept silence. It had been hard, but it was his duty. Had he broken out in impatient murmurs at the ways of his God, the godless, who were maliciously watching how he would behave, would have been delighted; so, for the honor of his God, he held his peace, and put a bridle upon his lips.

3. But this effort at repression only stirred up his pain all the more. The heart which seemed so quiet, was seething beneath the surface. The more he thought of it all, the more impatient and indignant he grew, till at last the flame which he could no longer control leaped out, and his hot heart expressed itself in words of fire.

4. But what those words were, he has not chosen to tell us; for the tender prayer that follows betrays nothing of the storm and passion that had been raging in his heart. Between verses 3 and 4 we may imagine a pause in which the Psalmist had reached a better mind. He bethinks him who this great God is, before whom he stands, and whose ways he is tempted to challenge; and as he thinks of God's great eternity, and of the infinite littleness and frailty of his own life, the hot words die upon his tongue, and in their stead he offers a gentle prayer.

5. He is overwhelmed by a sense of the infinite pathos of life—his own life, all human life. It is so very frail and short—only a hand-breadth or two. It is but a breath, a vapor, which at any moment may vanish. It has no substance, it is only a semblance and a shadow. It is full of noise, but the noise is all about nothing: it dies away upon God's great eternity. And especially empty is that noisiest struggle of all—the struggle for riches; when the pile is high, the man who has gathered it is called to his long rest. He has to leave it all, and does not even know whose it will be after him. Brief life, empty noise, fruitless effort—verily every man is but a vapor. Therefore he tenderly prays, "Make me to know mine end, O my God, and the measure of my days, what it is; and let me know how frail I am."

THIRD DAY: The Psalmist's Prayer for Pity (Verses 7-13)

1. The thing we call life is but a phantom, an idle pageant full of empty noise; and yet surely it must be more. The deep-hearted Psalmist can never be content with that; and he feels, through his sorrow, that that better thing for which he is looking, and in which, at the bottom of his heart, he believes, is only to be found in God. *My hope is in thee.*

2. He is now in a quieter mood, and he is able to see something of the meaning of his suffering. After all, it is not undeserved; it is divine chastisement for sin. So he prays God to deliver him from the sin, and so from the penalty which it brings. In this chastened mood he has no fear now of "sinning with his lips"; he recognizes the hand of God behind his calamity—"*Thou* hast done it." Nevertheless, he prays that that heavy hand be lifted. Life is so weak and frail that, if the omnipotent God thus assails it even in chastisement for sin, it and all its loveliness must perish outright—destroyed as utterly as the garment that is eaten by moths, or the meaning may be, as utterly and as easily obliterated as the moth itself is crushed. And again is heard the pathetic refrain: "Verily every man is but a vapor."

3. The Psalmist hopes in God: yet his soul is still shaken with the pity and the terror of life's facts. And he prays for help once again—this time, like Christ, with strong crying and tears (Hebrews 5:7). He appeals pathetically to the great Lord to have pity, on the ground that he is only a passing guest in this world, and therefore may justly claim the friendly consideration of his host; that he is, as it were, a stranger residing in a foreign land, and may therefore claim the protection of the lord of that land (cf. Leviticus 25:23). He is going away to the land of darkness (cf. Job 10:21, 22), and if his God means to show his kindness upon him at all, he must do so now, while he is in the land of the living. Therefore he prays that the angry face of God may be turned away from him for a brief space, that he may smile again—a beautiful word which suggests the sun breaking through the clouds—ere he enters the everlasting night.

FOURTH DAY: The Message of the Psalm for Us

1. Can such a psalm have any message for us at all? It is a poem of singular beauty, a very touching lament out of the long ago, a cry from a life that had been

> "Heated hot with burning fears,
> And dipped in baths of hissing tears,
> And battered with the shocks of doom."

But is it a cry for Christian lips? Is its sorrow, its dumb and almost hopeless resignation, its pathetic appeal for a gleam of light and pity, ere its writer is swallowed up in the everlasting darkness —is all this not done away for those who believe in the gospel?

2. That may be. Yet he is no great-hearted man, nor has he seen far or deep into life, who has not sometimes been touched by the "sense of tears in mortal things"; and that sense has seldom found more noble or affecting expression than in the exquisite elegy which we know as the Thirty-ninth Psalm. The Psalmist was overwhelmed with his sense of the pathos of human life. "Surely every man is but a breath" is the burden of his refrain; and though he finds his hope and antidote in God, this does not lift him completely over his sense of life's infinite and unutterable sadness. It is brief as a span. It is crushed like the moth. It is full of sound that signifies nothing. And while this is not a mood to be cherished, neither is it a mood to be always and instantly repelled. It is good to remind ourselves that most of our noise is for nothing, and that at the end yawns the grave.

3. But if sorrow is a fact, God is also a fact. My life is but a vapor, but *my hope is in thee.* According to some, this suggests that the Psalmist expected God to interpose and vindicate him in this world, especially as his outlook upon the world beyond is so gloomy (verse 13). But in spite of that outlook, it would still seem that the Psalmist yearns for, and hopes in, and even dimly believes in, immortality. Life is so sad that there is nothing to be hoped for here—"what wait I for?" His hope must therefore be in God, who is not bound by the frailty and the limitations of this earthly life. We may say, if we please, that he is pushed, by his sorrow, into his faith in a God of the Beyond; but at any rate, he is pushed upon a certainty. And the hope with which he comforted his broken heart, and the faith which steadied him when crushed by a sense of the vanity and transience of life, may be ours. Beyond the shadows of this world is the substance of that other world. Beyond the vapor which appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away, is the infinite and eternal God.

Fifth Day: Paraphrase of the Psalm

I resolved to watch my words, and carefully to abstain from murmuring against my unhappy lot; for there were godless ones about me, who would have mockingly rejoiced, had they heard me complain of the ways of my God. So I remained altogether silent, and uttered not a word, though my pain was stirred up within me; my heart was hot, and burning thoughts tormented me.

Then I prayed that thou wouldst teach me how near my end was, and how brief my life. Yea, is it not very brief?—but a span, and as nothing in thy sight, and man is but a breath. He moves about as a shadow; his life is full of empty noise; he heaps up and knows not who shall gather.

What, then, has life to yield? My heart yearns for the substance beyond the shadow. O my God, my hope is in thee. Save me from sin and the chastisement it brings, lest I become the scorn of the fool. I am altogether silent; for it is thy hand that has wrought this thing. But oh! remove that heavy hand of thine from me, for I am crushed to earth. With stern discipline thou dost chastise man for his sin, withering his beauty like the moth; man is but a breath.

O listen, when I beseech thee with loud crying and tears; for thou art my Lord and protector in the strange land of my sojourning. Look away from me, that I may smile again, before I go away and be no more.

Explain to yourself every phrase of the psalm in thoroughly modern and unconventional language.

The success of your effort will be best tested by writing a paraphrase of your own.

Sixth Day: Points for Consideration

In the light of the psalm, consider the following quotations:

1. I said to myself—Is this life? But I made up my mind that never would I give myself tongue. I clapped a muzzle on my mouth. Had I followed my own natural bent, I should have become expressive about what I had to endure, but I found that expression reacts on him who expresses and intensifies what is expressed.—(*Mark Rutherford.*)

(The rule of silence for the Benedictine order was based on the first verse of this psalm.)

2. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.
—(*Shakespeare,* The Tempest.)

3. That blessed mood,
In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world,
Is lightened. —(*Wordsworth,* Tintern Abbey.)

4. (*a*) To die is gain. (Philippians 1:21.)
(*b*) To depart and be with Christ is very far better. (Philippians 1:23.)
(*c*) Christ Jesus brought life and immortality to light. (2 Timothy 1:10.)
(*d*) Ye are no more strangers and sojourners, but ye are fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God. (Ephesians 2:19.)

Seventh Day: Questions for Practical Life

1. Recall the moments in which you were overwhelmed by a sense of the littleness and transience of life. By what thoughts, if any, were you steadied and comforted?

2. Are there any words of Jesus on the pathos of life? (cf. John 9: 4, "The night is coming.")

3. How far may a Christian appropriate the words of this psalm? (cf. James 4: 14, "What is your life? For ye are a vapor that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.")

4. Do you believe in immortality? If so, on what do you ground your belief? What would be the practical effect, upon your conduct or your attitude to life, of the disappearance of this belief?

5. What Bible teaching on the subject of the future life occurs to your mind?

6. Can you say, "My hope is in thee"? If not, why not?

STUDY V

The Forty-eighth Psalm

First Day: The Text of the Psalm

Great is Jehovah, and worthy of exceeding praise,
In the city of our God, his holy mountain.
Beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth,
Is Mount Zion on her northern side, the city of the great King.
God in her citadels
Has made himself known as a high tower.

For, see! the kings had gathered by appointment,
They crossed the frontier together.
But as for them, when they saw, they were straightway amazed;
Confounded, in hot haste they fled.
Shuddering seized them there—
Writhing, as a woman in travail;
(Shattered they were, as) by an east wind
Thou breakest in pieces the ships of Tarshish.
As we have heard, so we have seen,
In the city of Jehovah of hosts, in the city of our God;
God shall establish her forever.

We have thought, O God, of thy kindness,
In the midst of thy temple.
As is thy name, O God,
So is thy praise to the ends of the earth;
Of righteousness thy right hand is full;
Let Mount Zion be glad,
Let the daughters of Judah rejoice,
Because of thine acts of judgment.

Go about Zion, and circle her round,
Count her towers;
Set your mind upon her ramparts,
Consider her citadels,
That ye may tell to the generation following,
That such is Jehovah our God.
He it is that shall guide us for ever and aye.

Meditate upon the psalm carefully, and without the aid of books, until you have some adequate idea of it, in detail and as a whole.

Second Day: The City of the Great King (Verses 1-8)

1. It is somewhat pathetic that we know nothing whatever of the origin of this joyous and beautiful psalm. It is generally believed that, in common with Psalm 46, it was written to celebrate the deliverance of Judah from Sennacherib and his Assyrians in 701 B. C., described in 2 Kings 18, 19; Isaiah 36, 37. Others, however, regard it as a pilgrim psalm, sung by Jews who had traveled from distant lands to Jerusalem, and who looked with eyes of reverent wonder and delight at the famous old city, where so much epoch-making history had been enacted. In either case, the affection of the singer goes out to the city, and to the temple hill, and most of all to the great unseen King who had defended the city, and who was worshipped in the temple.

2. He was great and worthy of all praise from his grateful worshippers in the temple on the lovely Zion hill. No Greek could have spoken of Athens with a more passionate enthusiasm than this Psalmist speaks of Zion. And it was not only her beauty that thrilled him, but still more the great deeds that had been done in her; for there God had often, but especially on one conspicuous occasion, made himself known as the champion and defender of his people.

3. For, see! the Psalmist's blood warms as he thinks of it. The great Assyrian army, whose divisions were commanded by vassal kings, gathered for an assault upon the little land of Judah, and especially upon her royal capital city. On they came; but—and here the Psalmist's brief words are vivid, and almost breathless—when they saw, that is, when they saw this wonderful city, and the mysterious power of the God whom its people worshipped, they were amazed, confounded, and off they hurried away (cf. 2 Kings 19: 35, 36)—trembling, for all their warlike might, like a woman in labor, shattered as terribly as the wind shivers the giant ships in pieces. This is a very splendid description, done, with inimitable art, in a word or two; its effect is to show how powerless the "kings" were, when they clashed in conflict with the Great King.

4. The Psalmist and his countrymen had often heard of such stories; they had been told how the powerful Pharaoh had been crushed by Jehovah, how the horse and his Egyptian rider had been thrown into the sea. But now with their own eyes and in their own city they had seen a thing as great as any that had happened in the olden days. "As we have heard, so have we seen." And with those ancient tales in their ears, corroborated by the sights they have seen with their own eyes, they can look forward to the future of the city with calm confidence: "God will establish her forever."

THIRD DAY: The Appeal to Experience (Verses 9:14)

1. The eager, graphic description of the Assyrian defeat is followed by two verses in a more subdued strain, as the singers quietly contemplate the kindness of their God. "We have thought on, turned over in our minds, pondered on, thy loving kindness, O God, in the midst of thy temple." That loving kindness on which they ponder is not an abstract thing, nor a mere attribute of their God; it has been vitally illustrated by the deliverance which the singer described in the first part of the psalm. *That* was his loving kindness, and for that definite thing they meet in the temple to praise him. And his praise is sung, not only in the temple, but all the world over; for this victory which his right hand wrought for his people, will reach and gladden the ears of all men everywhere, and they will be won to the worship of the great God of Israel.

2. But most of all it is the delivered people themselves that rejoice —of Judah, which was ravaged, and Jerusalem, which was threatened. Therefore "let Mount Zion be glad, let the daughters—that is, the little village-towns—of Judah, rejoice" because of this marvellous interposition of their God. And this is an interposition which it is impossible to deny; a walk about Jerusalem will convince the most obstinate unbeliever. Count her towers—not one of them is missing. Mark well her bulwarks—not one of them has been injured by the enemy (cf. 2 Kings 19:32). Consider her citadels—not one of them has been touched. Is it not wonderful how our God has preserved his city from the menace of the Assyrians, when they were about to come down like wolves on the fold? and not only wonderful, but indubitable—the proofs of his power are everywhere in the city so strangely, but completely, preserved from destruction.

3. Now those who have been privileged to witness so wonderful a manifestation of God's grace are bound to see that the story is not forgotten. It must be told to the children and handed on by them to the generations yet to come. So the Psalmist concludes by bidding his people mark and consider it all well, that they may tell to the next generation what a glorious God is Israel's God. As they look at their stately city, beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth, and think how miraculously she was preserved from destruction, they will say with grateful pride, "Such is Jehovah, our God; HE (very emphatic) will be our guide for ever and ever."

4. The words rendered "even unto death" (al-muth) recall the musical directions at the beginning of Psalms 9 (al muth-labben) and 46 (al-alamoth), and probably in reality do not belong to Psalm 48, but are part of the musical superscription to the following psalm (49). The Psalmist is not thinking of the guidance of the

individual unto death, but of the guidance of the national life forever. But though we may lose the words which, by association, are so dear to many, we do not lose the essential thought which they express; "for *he* will guide us *for ever and ever.*"

FOURTH DAY: The Message of the Psalm for Us

1. Few psalms so brief are so rich in great suggestions. The first of these is this, that one of the great ways in which God reveals himself is upon the field of history. We are apt to think of revelation too abstractly, or to associate it too exclusively with the Bible; here we learn that "God has made himself known *in her citadels*"—in the citadels of Jerusalem—by defending them (cf. verses 3 and 13). If the enemy alluded to in this psalm is Sennacherib and his Assyrians, there was certainly something remarkable, not to say miraculous, in his speedy departure (2 Kings 19:35). The inhabitants had conclusive proof of God's presence within the walls of Jerusalem, which the unseen King had defended against the blustering kings who opposed him; and it is this that gives vividness and color to the more abstract words of the psalm, whose concrete, historical basis we too seldom realize. This was the "loving kindness" which the worshippers thought on, as they gathered in the temple (verse 9); this was one of the divine "judgments" at which Zion and the daughters of Judah rejoiced (verse 11). This is a message for us, that we shall find God upon the field of our own history no less than Israel's, the history of the twentieth century no less than of the centuries long dead.

2. Next we learn—though this is another aspect of the truth just stated—that the present is as full of God as the past ever was: "As we have heard, so we have seen." What a splendid confession! All that our fathers have told us about God we have grandly verified in our own experience. The God who defeated Sennacherib is as great as the God who defeated Pharaoh. It is a mistake to speak of the good old days, a denial of the God who is the same yesterday, to-day, and forever. And so sure and real was God to the Psalmist, in this deliverance, that he looked out upon the future, with the sublime confidence that God would be there as well. "He will establish his city forever" (verse 8), "HE will be our guide forever" (verse 14). All history is illuminated for the Psalmist by the divine presence; but particularly helpful is it for us to note his fine appreciation of the present.

3. Mark, further, the appeal to experience. Anyone who doubted God's power could convince himself of it. "Walk about Zion, count her towers, mark her bulwarks." The city and her defences are untouched; count them and see. If God has really been working in the world, there should be proof of it, even obvious proof; and in a hundred directions, the proof is abundant—in the advances of civilization, in the progress of missions, etc. The Christian should not only be willing to accept a challenge, but even ready himself to chal-

lenge doubters with indubitable proof of what God has done for the world or for himself.

4. The last two verses suggest the obligation of taking deliberate steps to perpetuate the memory of God's goodness. As we have heard from our fathers (verse 8), so our children have the right to hear from us; for their faith, like ours, will be strengthened, not only by what they see, but by what they hear (verse 8).

Fifth Day: Paraphrase of the Psalm

Our God is a great God, and worthy of all praise, in the city of Jerusalem and on Zion's holy hill. Fair she rises on the northern ridge—Mount Zion, the city of the Great King, the joy of all the earth. God has revealed himself in her by preserving her citadels from peril.

For, see! kings gathered and came on together; but one glance at the city was enough. No sooner did they see it than they hastened away in astonishment, confusion, and terror, as of a woman in travail—shattered as the east wind shatters the giant ships. The present is not less wondrous than the past. The tales of the olden time have been matched by what we have seen with our own eyes in this city of our mighty God, Jehovah of hosts, the city which he will preserve forever.

Assembled as we are in the temple, we call to mind thy goodness to us in this great deliverance. Thy name is known and thy praise is sung throughout the length and breadth of the world; for just and mighty art thou. Let Jerusalem and all the cities of Judah rejoice, because of thy just judgments.

For who can deny that Jehovah has saved Jerusalem? Walk round about the city and count her towers—not one of them is missing. Her walls have not been battered, nor have her citadels been touched. Lay this up in your heart and tell it to your children, that this is the work of Jehovah our God, and with the same omnipotent love he will guide us forever and ever.

Explain to yourself every phrase of the psalm in thoroughly modern and unconventional language.

The success of your effort will be best tested by writing a paraphrase of your own.

Sixth Day: Points for Consideration

1. Read 2 Kings 19: 9-37, and consider whether Psalm 48 may be appropriately referred to the situation there described.

2. Read Psalm 46, and consider whether it may have been written for the same occasion as Psalm 48.

3. On one view, Psalm 48 celebrates the deliverance from Sennacherib; on another, it is a pilgrim psalm, sung by pilgrims who had traveled to Jerusalem to take part in one of the great feasts.

Go carefully through the psalm from each of these points of view. For example, "As we have heard, so have we seen," will mean, on the one view, that the present is not less wondrous than the past; on the other, that the city is as wonderful as the rumors of it had led the pilgrims to expect.

So, on the one view, verses 12 and 13 will be the poet's appeal to the people of the city to mark well how completely it had been preserved from destruction; on the other, the pilgrim singer appeals to his companions to mark the city's glories well, that they may be able to tell of them to posterity.

On either view, verses 4 and 5 refer to some signal deliverance of the holy city.

SEVENTH DAY: Questions

1. Enumerate some of the ways in which God reveals himself. (cf. Ps. 48:3; Ps. 19:1; Ps. 19:7-11.)

2. Can you point to any recent or contemporary national or international experience, which is calculated to strengthen faith in God?

3. Is it reasonable to speak of the good old times?

4. Is your religion a matter of hearsay or of experience (cf. verse 8; also Job 42:5)? Does it give you present joy (cf. verse 11) as well as hope for the future (cf. verses 8, 14)?

5. Take any of the common attributes of God, and show how they have been illustrated in history.

6. To what facts would you point the sceptic as the most convincing proof of the operation of God in the world?

7. Do we sufficiently recognize our religious obligations to the children? What means would you suggest for perpetuating a living sense of God's goodness in national history?

STUDY VI

The Forty-ninth Psalm

FIRST DAY: The Text of the Psalm

Hear this, all ye peoples,
Hearken, all ye that dwell in the world:
Both men of low degree and high,
Rich and poor together.
My mouth shall utter deep wisdom,
And the musing of my heart shall be of understanding.
I will incline mine ear to a proverb,
I will open my riddle to the sound of the lyre.
Refrain—(Man in honor abideth not,
He is like the beasts that perish.)[1]

Why should I be afraid in the days of misfortune,
When my cunning foes compass me round with iniquity—
They that trust in their wealth,
And boast of the abundance of their riches?

Surely no man can by any means redeem himself,
Or give to God the ransom he requires—
That he should live for evermore,
And not see the pit:
For too costly is the redemption of man's life,
And one must cease (from that effort) forever.
Nay, he shall see (the pit): the (worldly) wise die,
The fool and the brutish perish together,
And leave their wealth to others.
The grave is their home forever,
Their habitation to all generations,
Though they called lands after their names.
Refrain—Man in honor abideth not,
He is like the beasts that perish.

This is the fate of those that have self-confidence,
And the end of those that have pleasure in their portion.
Like sheep they descend to Sheol;[2]
Death is their shepherd, and straight down they go.
Soon their form wastes away,
And Sheol is their home.

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[1]The proverb, or riddle, appears to be the refrain (cf. verses 12, 20), and some propose to insert it here.
[2]The underworld.

Surely God will redeem my soul from the hand of Sheol,
For he will take me (to himself).

Therefore be not afraid, when a man grows rich,
When the pomp of his house increases.
For of it all, he takes nothing with him when he dies,
His pomp does not go down after him.
Though he counts himself happy while he is alive
And wins praise because he does well to himself;
Yet he shall go to the generation of his fathers,
Who see the light nevermore.
Refrain—Man in honor abideth not,
He is like the beasts that perish.

Meditate upon this psalm carefully, and without the aid of books, until you have some adequate idea of it, in detail and as a whole.

SECOND DAY: The Futility of Riches at Death (Verses 1-12)

1. What the Psalmist has to say he regards as of universal and vital importance. Accordingly in the opening verses, he summons the whole world to hear it, men of high degree and low, the rich and the poor together; the latter he mentions expressly, as the theme of his song is to be the impotence of riches. He has pondered the question deeply—especially as it was summarily expressed in the popular proverb which he chooses as the refrain of his own poem: "Man in honor abideth not, he is like the beasts that perish." He sings his song to the accompaniment of the lyre, and under the strains of the music, the prophetic mood steals over him, in which he has an insight into the riddle of life (cf. 2 Kings 3: 15).

2. The Psalmist had been vexed, like many another Old Testament singer, by the seeming victory of wickedness and defeat of piety. The wealth went to the unscrupulous, and the pious were driven to the wall. But his fear vanishes, and he becomes reconciled to his lowly and persecuted lot, when he begins to reflect on the utter and absolute powerlessness of money to help its possessor in the great crisis of death. They trust in their wealth and boast of it, but when the death-angel knocks at their door, not all their money can bribe him to stay away. Surely no man can by any means redeem *himself* (this, rather than *his brother,* was no doubt the original text). All the money in the world cannot buy back a soul on which Death is laying his icy hand. The man, for all his wealth, must go down to the pit; he cannot even take it with him, he must leave it to others.

3. The verse beginning *their inward thought is* (verse 11) should undoubtedly be rendered: *Graves are their houses forever,* the grave is their everlasting home. Throughout the psalm the poet dwells on this thought with gruesome emphasis, and the contrast here is heightened by the mention of the dead man's past possessions. While he was alive, he was the lord of vast estates; so great was he that cities, like Alexandria, were even named after him. But who cares for him now? and where is he now? In a little narrow grave. He needs but a tiny spot of the great lands that were once his own, wherein to sleep his eternal sleep. Yes, the homely old proverb is profoundly true: "Man in honor abideth not, he is like the beasts that perish."

THIRD DAY: The Prospects of the Good at Death (Verses 13-20)

1. This psalm does not, like so many others—the first, for example—elaborate the contrast between the destinies of the two great types of men. The destiny of the good man is only once touched (verse 15)—very effectively indeed, but rather in a hint than in a picture; but the general theme of the psalm is the essential impotence of riches, their inability to help a man when he needs help the most—a theme which is gathered up in the refrain.

2. After the striking contrast between the vast domains of which the rich were lords when they were alive, and the little grave in which they have to lie at the last, the Psalmist renews his grim description of their fate. He compares them to a flock of silly sheep, who are driven down from the earth to the underworld by the stern shepherd Death. To appreciate the vivid force of this picture, we have to remember that the verb in "Death *shall be their shepherd*" is the very same as that in the first verse of Psalm 23, "Jehovah *is my shepherd*." They will not have the gracious Jehovah to lead them in the other world to pastures green and waters of rest; but the grim, terrible, inexorable Death, who will drive them down to the dark and dusty underworld.

3. "But *God* will redeem *my* soul." What a startling contrast! The same word is used as in verse 7. *Money* cannot redeem a soul, but God can. The unredeemed waste away in Sheol, the dreadful underworld; "but God will redeem me *from the hand of Sheol*"—as if Sheol were a monster, stretching out his cruel hand to grasp and hold him forever. But God the omnipotent draws him back: "for"—as the Hebrew says, with exquisite simplicity—"he will take me," the word used for the "taking" of Enoch (Gen. 5:24) and Elijah (2 Kings 2:9, 10). There is something wonderful about the reticence of the Psalmist here. How God will take him, and whither, he does not say; he does not know. Enough for him that God would take him to himself.

FOURTH DAY: The Message of the Psalm for Us

1. The general message of the psalm is the impotence of riches to help us when we need help most—in the hour of death. One great scholar has said that the Psalmist fails to fulfil the expectations which he raised by the trumpet tones of the opening verses; for the chief thought of the psalm, that riches are no defence against death, is as trivial as possible. But is it not just the commonplace that is often most worthy of attention, and most apt to be neglected? Is not this, obvious as it is, precisely the thought that is so seldom laid to heart by those who spend their lives in the effort to amass as much as they can? They go on adding house to house and field to field, forgetting the truth of which, with grim realism, the Psalmist reminds us, that at the end of all their effort lies a little grave.

2. There can be no question that this thought, if firmly held before the mind in our efforts to succeed in life, would tend to throw things into their proper perspective. It would open our eyes to the things that really matter. The things that matter now are the things that will matter then; and money, says the Psalmist, can do nothing for the dying or the dead. It cannot bribe the death-angel, and when the man has been driven down, like a sheep, by the stern Shepherd, into the valley of the unbroken shadow (verse 19), it cannot bring him back again.

3. This, then, is the Psalmist's solution of the riddle of life. Now the rich man "blesses his soul," and "does well to himself," while out of the depths of his loneliness and sorrow the poor man lifts a tear-stained face to God. But wait till death, and then we shall see. Some psalmists (cf. Ps. 37:9) had thought the compensations would be in this world; this Psalmist sees deeper. Whether there are compensations here or not, at any rate at death the difference will be infinite. "God will redeem my soul from the hand of Sheol, for he will receive me." There is a deeper truth even than this, caught in a divine moment by the writer of Psalm 73, that we may be continually with God—here as well as there; that he not only will receive us to glory, but that he guides us, even in this world, by his counsel, across the pilgrimage of life (verses 23, 24). Still our Psalmist has chosen to concentrate his gaze upon the great moment of death, and with extraordinary power and simplicity compelled us to feel that nothing matters then but God.

Fifth Day: Paraphrase of the Psalm

The riddle that has troubled me concerns all the world. Listen, then, all of you—high and low, rich and poor, when I talk of it; for I shall speak as a wise man who has meditated deeply thereon, and the answer that has come to me I will proclaim to the sound of the lyre. (Here is the riddle expressed in the popular proverb: The man of pomp abides not therein; like the beast he perishes.)

I am tempted to fear, as I suffer from cunning and wickedness on all sides of me, from men who trust in their wealth and boast of their vast riches. But why should I be afraid? Not one can save himself from death by giving God a ransom; for the ransom of the soul is too costly, and the man must leave life forever. Yea, he shall assuredly see the grave. For the rich fool, despite his worldly wisdom, perishes, and leaves his wealth to others. The grave is his eternal home, even though he has called whole lands his own. The man of pomp abides not therein; like the beast he perishes. This is the fate of all who are foolishly confident and who boast of their wealth. Death drives them into the grave, as the shepherd his sheep, and down they go; and soon their image fades away in the grave which is their home.

But God himself shall redeem my soul from the hand of the grave. Yes, he shall take me to himself.

So the sight of the rich man with his vast wealth need not make thee afraid; for not a fragment of it all can he take with him when he dies, nor can his wealth go down after him into the grave. For though he deemed himself happy in his life-time and was praised for his good fortune, yet in the end he must dwell with his fathers in their home of everlasting darkness. The man of pomp abides not therein; like the beast he perishes.

Explain to yourself every phrase of the psalm in thoroughly modern and unconventional language.

The success of your effort will be best tested by writing a paraphrase of your own.

Sixth Day: Points for Consideration

1. "A man's life consisteth *not* in the abundance of the things which he possesseth" (Luke 12:15). Is not much of our eager life a practical denial of this word of Jesus?

2. Consider (*a*) the parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:16-21), (*b*) the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), in the light of the teaching of this psalm.

3. In Mark 10:24 we read, "How hard is it *for them that trust in riches* to enter into the kingdom of God!" It is significant, however, that many good manuscripts omit the phrase "that trust in riches." Those who *have* riches may enter into the kingdom of God, though with difficulty (verse 23); but for those who *trust* in riches (cf. Ps. 49:6) it is not only hard, but impossible.

4. Do you think the writer of this psalm has a surer hold of the future life than the writer of Ps. 39? Compare Psalm 39:7 (and 13) with Ps. 49:15.

5. Read Psalm 73:23-26, and note the writer's powerful consciousness of the divine presence with him in this world, as well as his faith that afterwards he will be taken to glory.

6. The following quotation from *Everyman,* perhaps the finest of the Morality plays that have come down to us from the middle ages, is a remarkably vivid illustration of the teaching of the psalm. Its peculiar appositeness will excuse the length of the quotation. Everyman, who represents humanity, is summoned by Death to go on his long journey. In his distress he appeals in turn to Fellowship, Kindred, and Goods (that is, Riches), but they all renounce and forsake him. The extract is taken from the dialogue of Everyman with Goods:

Everyman:

Come hither, Good, in all the haste thou may;
For of counsel I must desire thee.

Goods:

Sir, an ye in the world have sorrow or adversity,
That can I help you to remedy shortly.

It is another disease that grieveth me;
In this world it is not, I tell thee so
I am sent for another way to go,
To give a strait account general
Before the highest Jupiter of all;
And all my life I have had my pleasure in thee,
Therefore I pray thee now go with me;

For, peradventure, thou mayest before God Almighty
My reckoning help to clean and purify,
For it is said ever among,
That money maketh all right that is wrong.

G. Nay, nay, Everyman, I sing another song;
I follow no man in such voyages,
For, an I went with thee,
Thou shouldest fare much the worse for me;
For because on me thou diddest set thy mind,
Thy reckoning I have made blotted and blind,
That thine account thou cannot make truly;
And that hast thou for the love of me.

E. That would grieve me full sore,
When I should come to that fearful answer;
Up, and let us go thither together.

G. Nay, not so; I am too brittle, I may not endure;
I will follow no man one foot, be ye sure.

* * * *

E. Ah, Good, thou hast long had my hearty love;
I gave thee that which should be the Lord's above;
But wilt thou not go with me indeed?
I pray thee truth to say.

G. No, so God me speed;
Therefore farewell, and have good day.

E. Oh, to whom shall I make my moan,
For to go with me in that heavy journey?

SEVENTH DAY: Questions

1. What is your personal attitude to money?
2. What is Christ's teaching about money?
3. What is the place of money in the kingdom of God?

(Note that the wealthy men whose fate the Psalmist contemplates, are not only wealthy, but wicked [verse 5]. The last verse in the English version of the psalm, "Man that is in honor *and understandeth not* is like the beasts that perish," is probably wrong; there is only a single letter of difference in the original, between this and "Man in honor *abideth not*" (verse 12). Nevertheless, the words represent a great truth. It is the rich *fool,* the rich man who has no insight into the real place and meaning of money, who perishes.)

4. Would you be contented, if you were very poor?
5. Do you ever contemplate your own death? Has the thought of it any real influence upon your conduct and aims?
6. What are your chief aims in life? Will you be glad to have cherished them, when you come to die?

STUDY VII

The Fifty-second Psalm

First Day: The Text of the Psalm

Why glory in mischief, thou mighty man?
The mercy of God is all the day.
Thy tongue deviseth ruin,
Like a whetted razor, thou worker of fraud.
Thou lovest evil and not good,
Lies, and not right speaking;
Thou lovest all voracious words
Thou deceitful tongue!

But God, on his part, shall tear thee down forever,
Grasp thee, and pull thee out of the tent,
And root thee out of the land of the living.
The righteous shall see, and fear,
And laugh at him.
"Look!" they will say, "there is the great man that made not God his stronghold,
But trusted in the mass of his riches,
And felt strong in his substance."

But as for me, I am in God's house like a green olive tree:
I trust in God's mercy for ever and aye.
I will praise thee forever, because thou hast done this,
And I will wait on thy name—for it is good—
In the presence of those that love thee.

Meditate upon the psalm carefully, and without the aid of books, until you have some adequate idea of it, in detail and as a whole.

Second Day: The Fate of Arrogance (Verses 1-5)

1. It is quite certain that the superscriptions formed no part of the original psalms, and many scholars lay little or no stress upon them in their efforts to discover the occasion and origin of a psalm. Whatever may be said of the propriety of the unusually elaborate superscription to Psalm 52, there can be no doubt that the psalm is much more than a meditation; it emerges out of a very vivid and definite historical situation.

2. The man addressed so abruptly and ironically as a "hero" or "mighty man" in the first verse is described, briefly indeed, but in touches so sharp and clear that we can almost fancy we see his sleek, cunning face, and hear the boastful words roll from his foolish lips. He is well-to-do, with such an abundance of wealth to trust in—like the man who vexed the singer of Psalm 49 (verse 6)—that the wisdom or necessity of trusting in God never occurs to him (verse 7). He is clearly a man of power and importance; his downfall confirms the faith of the righteous in a moral order, and is welcomed by them with jubilation (verse 6). In particular he uses his influence in treacherous and despicable ways; he is cunning and a liar. His tongue is a tongue of deceit; he loves lies rather than truth, though that is but one manifestation, within the sphere of words, of a character that "loves evil rather than good" (verse 3).

3. But power and cunning usually go hand in hand with cruelty, and this "hero" was no exception. Especially did his cruelty reveal itself through that subtlest medium of all, the medium of speech. His words were voracious words, that "devoured" his neighbors—their peace, their property, their reputation, perhaps their life. His tongue was like a razor whetted to the finest edge, so that it should cut deep. No wonder that with his wealth, influence, and disregard of God, he, uttering boastful words, vexed righteous souls.

4. But the Psalmist has too deep a faith in the moral order to be permanently vexed by such a man. He will only have his day, and his end will be destruction. God (verse 5), whom this braggart has ignored (verse 7), may be trusted to uphold the moral government of his world; and in a succession of powerful figures, the Psalmist expresses his earnest faith in the certainty of such a man's destruction. He shall be torn down, as a lofty tower is demolished (same word as Judges 8:9); he shall be seized, as a piece of coal is seized with the tongs; he shall be plucked out of his tent; and, deeply as he seems to be rooted, he shall be torn up by the roots and, as it were, hurled out of the land of the living. All men must die, but the Psalmist anticipates for this "hero" a swift and violent doom. That is his faith and his consolation.

THIRD DAY: The Joy of the Faithful (Verses 6-9)

1. In two ways does the Psalmist reconcile himself to the existence of the powerful and unscrupulous braggart who vexed him; first, as we have seen, by contemplating his terrible and irrevocable doom, and secondly, by putting him into his proper perspective in the world. After all, he was only as a spot on the sun. He might boast and lie; nevertheless, "the mercy of God was all the day" (verse 1). This, after all, is *the* stupendous fact, in comparison with which all the other facts that tempt men to murmur and doubt are as nothing.

2. But apart from that great and radiant fact, which is the sublimest of all consolations to those that have eyes to see it, the doom of such a "hero" as is described in verses 1-3 is certain; and when good men see it, they shall fear, that is, they shall reverence this mysterious power, which so surely makes for righteousness, and they shall laugh at their fallen enemy. From a Christian standpoint, such an expression of satisfaction may seem unworthy; but, according to the usage of the Old Testament, this is not the malicious laughter of a petty personal triumph, but the laughter of joy at the vindication of the moral order.

3. The "hero" has had his turn, now it is the turn of the righteous; and they will say: "Look! there is the man that trusted in his money, and not in his God." The man of lying tongue, of materialistic ambitions and temper, is a practical atheist, whatever be his profession; and this is the end of him. The money in which he trusted will do nothing for him, when God comes to uproot him out of the land of the living (cf. Ps. 49:6, 7); and the heart of the righteous is eased, and their faith confirmed (verse 6), as they see such a one swept suddenly away from the place where he wrought so much harm.

4. The moral order, however, has its positive as well as its negative vindication. The arrogant blusterer shall be torn down from his pedestal; "but as for me, I am in God's house like a green olive tree." He has no fear of being torn up by the roots; like an olive tree, he flourishes. He will not be swept, by some sudden gust of doom, off the land of the living; he has his place secure as a guest in the house of God (perhaps originally the temple). And why? Because "my trust is"—not in the multitude of my riches (verse 7), but—"in God's mercy for ever and ever." Desolation, annihilation, on the one hand; beauty, prosperity, security, on the other. Such is the infinite difference between the destinies of the good and the bad.

5. The Psalmist having beheld, at least with the eye of faith, the

vindication of the moral order, which means the triumph of the kingdom of God, vows to praise him forever, because he has secured this vindication and triumph, and to proclaim his goodness (or, according to the ordinary text, to wait upon his name, that is, himself) in the presence of his loyal servants.

FOURTH DAY: The Message of the Psalm for Us

1. The difference between the destinies of the good and the bad is a favorite theme of the psalmists (cf. Ps. 1); but the first verse of this psalm sets the moral anomalies of the world in a fresh and striking light. The boasting of the big man, his calumnies and his cruelties, may be vexatious enough; but they have little power to destroy the peace of the man who remembers that "the mercy of God is all the day."[1] Those may be great facts, but this is an infinitely greater fact; and the art of happiness consists in seeing life in its true perspective. The love of God as expressed in the freshness of the morning, in the blessed repose of the night, in the mysterious succession of the seasons, seedtime and harvest, summer and winter, in the stimulus of work, in the joys of friendship and love, in the hopes and the consolations of religion—that love is all the day; it is, when we consider it well, the one everlasting and overwhelming fact of experience. And when we can see the incidents which distress or perplex us, against that glorious background, we have mastered the secret, not only of being resigned to our lot, but of rejoicing in it evermore (1 Thess. 5:16).

2. We are also reminded by this psalm of the deadly power of an unchastened tongue. The "hero" of the psalm was rich, powerful, cunning, and radically bad; but it is worthy of note that, though furnished with such an equipment for evil, it is upon the ruin wrought by his wicked tongue that the Psalmist concentrates his chief attention. Most of his baleful power expressed itself there. Like a razor, it cut deep and sharp into the reputations of other men; like an open grave (Ps. 5:9), it swallowed them up. And the destruction described in the dreadful words of verse 5 is felt by the Psalmist to be none too terrible for the man of sharp and slanderous tongue.

3. Christian sentiment may be shocked by such a confession of faith; but it must not be forgotten that there is nothing ignoble in the standpoint of the Old Testament. It is but the vehement expression of a passionate belief in the moral order, and a desire to see its consummation hastened. It is surprising, and, to a Christian sense, disappointing, to find two psalms so noble as 104 and 139 ending as they do, with a prayer for the obliteration of the wicked. But it is because the Psalmist is himself so astonished at the goodness of Jehovah of which the world is so full (104), so overawed

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[1] Some, who think this clause too abrupt for such a context, amend the text, by a very simple change, to read, "Why dost thou boast thyself *against the godly man* continually?"

by the thought of his loving omnipresence (139), that he feels there can be no ultimate place in the world for men who ignore that presence and defy that goodness. Those upon whom the psalmists imprecate the divine vengeance are not simply personal enemies; they are enemies of God and of morality (cf. Ps. 94: 1, 6). We dare not take their violent words upon our lips; but it would be well for us if we more fully shared their passionate faith in the divine government of the world, of which those words are but the vehement expression.

Fifth Day: Paraphrase of the Psalm

Why dost thou brag, O blatant hero, of the ruin thou art working with thy sharp and deadly tongue? Despite it, and mightier than it, is the radiant mercy of God which fills every day and all the day. But thine affections are set on evil and falsehood, on ruinous and deceitful words, and not on goodness and truth.

Thou shalt have thy reward. God will make an utter end of thee, seizing thee as one seizes coal with the tongs. He shall tear thee out of the tent, and root thee out of the land of the living, to the delight of the righteous, who shall exult when they see it. Such, they will say, is the fate of the man who presumptuously trusts in the power of his vast riches, instead of in God.

But I, too, have my reward. I flourish like the green olive trees in the temple court, because my trust is in the mercy of God continually. I will praise thee forever because of thy providence, and I will wait upon thee in the presence of thy people.

Explain to yourself every phrase of the psalm in thoroughly modern and unconventional language.

The success of your effort will be best tested by writing a paraphrase of your own.

Sixth Day: Points for Consideration

1. "The storm, the rain slowly rotting the harvest, children sickening in cellars are obvious; but equally obvious are an evening in June, the delight of men and women in one another, in music, and in the exercise of thought."—*Mark Rutherford.*

2. "His power broken at Marston Moor, Charles I was a hostage or a prisoner in the Scottish camp at Newark. The triumphant ministers insulted their captive by ordering Psalm 52 to be sung: 'Why boastest thou thyself, thou tyrant, that thou canst do mischief; whereas the goodness of God endureth yet daily?' It was by an appeal to the Psalms that Charles robbed the insult of its sting. His only reply was to ask for Psalm 56: 'Be merciful unto me, O God, for man goeth about to devour me; he is daily fighting, and troubling me. Mine enemies are daily in hand to swallow me up; for they be many that fight against me, O Thou Most Highest.'"—(*Prothero,* The Psalms in Human Life, p. 242.)

3. On the vanity of outward religious service unaccompanied by a resolute control of the tongue, see the striking word of James in 1:26.

4. James seems to have been specially impressed by the perils and responsibilities of speech. Consider carefully 3:2-8.

Is there any word of Jesus on this subject? (cf. Matthew, 12:36, 37.)

5. The cursing psalms need not be defended; but how may they be explained?

Note that their violent temper is sometimes, even in the Old Testament, expressly or implicitly, repudiated. The great sufferer in Psalm 22 utters no prayer for vengeance; and Job (31:29, 30), in his noble defence, makes the remarkable claim:

"Never did I rejoice at the destruction of him that hated me,
Or lifted myself up when calamity overtook him:
Never did I suffer my mouth to sin,
By asking his life with a curse."

6. Consider the precious fellowship into which the man of faith is brought (verse 9).

Seventh Day: Questions

1. Is the "mercy of God" a real fact to you?
2. Where do you find it in your experience?
3. Is it in accordance with the spirit of the Bible to look for it in the beauty and order of the world without, the air and the light, the sunshine and the rain, as well as in the inner experience? (cf. Ps. 136: 1-9, 25.)
4. Is the mercy of God so real and so precious to you that you can remain trustful, contented, and glad, in the face of trial?
5. Has anyone's peace or reputation ever suffered from your sharp tongue?
6. Do you sufficiently recognize that the disciplining of the tongue is a grave religious obligation?
7. Have you any sense, in your personal experience, of the deep and quiet joy expressed in verse 8 of Psalm 52?

STUDY VIII

The Ninetieth Psalm

First Day: The Text of the Psalm

Lord, thou hast been our dwelling-place
In all generations.
Ere the mountains were born,
Or the earth and the world were brought forth,
From everlasting to everlasting art thou, O God.

Thou turnest man back to dust,
And sayest, "Return, ye children of men."
For a thousand years are in thy sight
But as yesterday, when it is past,
And as a watch in the night.

Thou dost sweep them away like a flood; they fall asleep.[1]
They are like the grass which grows up:
In the morning it blossoms and grows up,
In the evening it is cut down and withers.

For we are consumed through thine anger,
And through thy wrath are we confounded.
Thou hast set our iniquities before thee,
Our secret sins in the light of thy countenance.
For all our days decline by reason of thy wrath,
We spend our years as a sigh.

Our years, at their height, are seventy,
Or, at the utmost, eighty;
Yet is their breadth but toil and trouble;
For quickly it passes, and we fly away.

Who recognizes the power of thine anger?
And who stands in (wise) awe of thy wrath?
O teach us so to number our days,
That we may reap the harvest of a wise heart.

Return, O Jehovah! How long?
And have pity upon thy servants.
Satisfy us in the morning with thy kindness,
That all our days we may be glad and jubilant.
Make us glad in proportion to the days of our affliction,
To the years of our sorrowful experience.

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[1]By a very simple change, one scholar has suggested a reading which harmonizes admirably with the following metaphor: "Thou dost sow them year by year."

Let thy doing be seen of thy servants,
And thy glory upon their children.
Let the favor of Jehovah our God be upon us,
And the work of our hands establish upon us:
The work of our hands—establish it.

1. Commit the psalm to memory in any version you please.
2. Meditate upon it carefully, and without the aid of books, until you have some adequate idea of it, in detail and as a whole.

SECOND DAY: The Brevity and Pathos of Human Life (Verses 1-8)

1. The writer of this noble psalm was deeply moved by two great thoughts which he could not help contrasting—the littleness and sadness of human life, and the eternity of God. The language of the earlier part of the psalm is so large and general that it may well be regarded as a lament over all human life; every man can make its sadly solemn words his own. But from verse 13, at any rate, it is plain that this "prayer," as it is called in the superscription, is offered on behalf of Israel; and the earlier part of the psalm perhaps has also Israel specially in view. Though true of all men, it was peculiarly true of Israel, that the Lord had been her dwelling place in all her generations.

2. The word with which the psalm opens is not the tender "Jehovah," but the majestic "Lord," a fitting word to introduce him as the God of eternity. Yet though majestic, we are reminded at the very outset that he is also gracious, "a dwelling-place to us [humanity or Israel?] age after age." The strong mountains might seem to be eternal; but God was before them, existing from the unthinkable past, on through the life of mountains and men, to the unimaginable future.

3. He is the one abiding fact in the universe. At his call the generations come up out of nothing, and go back again to the dust. Time has no meaning for him. A thousand years, which it takes thirty generations of men to traverse, are to him but as a day, a dead day, yesterday; nay, shorter than that—part of a day, rather part of a night, like a watch, a third part, of the dark night. The Psalmist calls up image after image to suggest the utter pathos and brevity of our little lives. It is as if a roaring torrent comes, which nothing can stand before, and carries them away. The life which was swept remorselessly away by the torrent, is now compared to the grass which comes up in the morning, only to be cut down and die in the evening. Life's day, at the longest, is short. It begins in a morning of promise; but after a few short hours, the evening falls, and the promise remains unfulfilled forever. All human life is flying swiftly into the night. How brief and sad it all is when placed in contrast with the calm and measureless eternity of God!

4. Now why should life be so sad and so short? Because, answers the Psalmist, the anger of God rests upon it. And why is God angry? Because of our sins. The answer is much the same as that given in Genesis 3. If life is full of toil and trouble, it is because man has sinned and God is angry. The sorrow that lies upon life is of man's own making. The Psalmist knows whereof he speaks.

His people are enduring the sorrows of exile, or more probably the sorrows, just as keen, that followed the return from exile; and these sorrows are almost invariably interpreted in the Old Testament as punishment for sin. So it was no mere commonplace confession, but one wrung out of the depths of a sorrowful experience spiritually interpreted, when the Psalmist said, "It is by reason of thine anger that we (Israel) are consumed, for thou hast set our secret sins in the light of thy countenance."

THIRD DAY: Prayer for Restoration (Verses 9-17)

1. The Psalmist has not yet exhausted his contemplation of the pathos of life. There is a pensive sadness about the familiar words, "We spend our years *as a tale that is told*"; but the more correct translation of the American Revised Version is much more touching and impressive, "We bring our years to an end *as a sigh*," as a murmur—brief and sad. This simple word summarizes the thought of the psalm thus far.

2. The Psalmist looks closely at an actual life. Take a long life, for comparison; but ah! no life is long when measured against the uncounted years of him to whom a millennium is but as a day. Seventy years, eighty at most—what is that against God's eternity? "For swiftly it passes, and like a bird we fly away." And what do those brief years bring? what but toil and trouble? A sad enough reading of the facts of life.

3. These facts, however, are surely fitted to teach us something, and the wise will learn therefrom. But there are so few that possess this wisdom—"few there be that find it." Therefore the Psalmist, realizing that the great tragedy of life is to interpret it wrongly, if it be not indeed a greater not to interpret it at all, prays that God may himself bring this lesson home to the sluggish hearts of men. Who lays to heart the power of thine anger? who realizes that life is sad because sin has brought upon it the chastising hand of God? Who but the man that has been taught by God himself? Hence the prayer, "To number our days so teach us that we may reap the harvest of a wise and understanding heart"—or some render, "that we may enter through the portals of wisdom." The brevity and sorrow of life are fitted to teach wisdom to those who will humbly consent to be taught.

4. The prayer that follows shows that Israel's plight is sad indeed. For many years she had been afflicted. Her God seemed to have gone away from her. She was attempting some high and needful task, but her efforts were defeated evermore. And what she needs is that her God should take pity upon her, come back to her, interpose for her, give her joy for sorrow, and crown with success the work she was seeking to do.

5. Therefore she prays, "Come back, O Jehovah. Be sorry for thy servants. Oh, satisfy us in the morning with thy love." After the long night of affliction, there come with the morning thoughts of hope and restoration. If only Jehovah will "work," do some manifest thing for them, interpose in some "glorious" way in their history, then all will be well; and they can prosecute their own work with success and joy. It is not certain what that work is

which they pray shall be established—possibly the common work of every day; but more probably the great national work of Israel, which, at the time this psalm was written, was the organizing of the church, her worship, and her life.

FOURTH DAY: The Message of the Psalm for Us

1. This is the Hebrew Hymn of Eternity. As its earlier notes are struck, infinite ages unroll before us, and fill with a presence—the presence of him who sits on his eternal throne, of him who was before the great mountains, and who will be when they are no more.

2. And in that presence, how strangely sad is human life! To express its infinite pathos, the Psalmist exhausts all the riches of his art. He is vexed at the thought of its unutterable frailty. The days are so few—seventy or eighty years at most—and they are full of toil and trouble; and despite it all, men have to go down to their graves with their work unestablished. Life has its morning, bright and fair; but it hastens into the evening, where it withers and is lost. It is ruthlessly swept away by the uncontrollable floods of time. It is like a sleep. It is like a meadow-flower, bright in the morning, withered in the evening. It is like a bird which flies away, and is seen no more. It is like a sigh, brief and lost forever, wrung from a heavily laden heart. And the generations pass like the individual men; they have their day, their brief, sad day, and go back to the dust. Morning and evening, flourishing and fading —all things pass but the everlasting God.

3. Thus these two thoughts are most intimately connected in the Psalmist's mind—the frailty of man and the eternity of God. The great poets have sung to us times without number of the sadness of life; but we do not need a great poet to tell us life is sad. Anyone who has looked at all beneath the surface, anyone who has watched a friend pass through the gates of death, or who has himself drawn near those gates with his work unaccomplished, any serious man, and many who are not serious, can tell us that. But our hearts are empty and unsatisfied, if we are told no more. It is the glory of the Bible that it evermore reminds us that, though all men and all things are passing, there is One who is eternal. On that great thought we can steady our hearts, when they are confused and distressed by the contemplation of life's endless change.

4. It is good "to number our days"—that is the moral which the poet puts into the heart of his tender song—good to consider their brevity and their meaning; but good, in the deepest sense, only to one who believes that behind their discipline is the hand of the eternal God (verse 11).

5. Watch how the Psalmist refuses to content himself with the thought of the majesty, the infinity, the eternity of God. That is indeed a sobering thought; but towards the end of his prayer, he turns to other and tenderer thoughts. He calls him Jehovah. He

asks him to take pity and to make his people glad. He speaks of his love and his favor. He asks him to act for them, and graciously to give their history a new turn. Clearly he is no unbending God of the endless ages, but a Person with a heart of love, whose gracious interposition will give strength and stability to the efforts of feeble human hands.

6. Nay, so dear is this thought to the Psalmist that he expresses it, almost in spite of himself, in the opening verses. He comes into God's presence prostrate before that awful majesty, as he thinks of him as lord of all the ages, creator of the strong mountains, arbiter of all the generations of men. But almost involuntarily he begins with the words, "Lord, thou hast been *our dwelling-place* in all generations." He is not, then, an impersonal force, he is the everlasting home of his people. The man who can thus address God in the beginning of his prayer has already answered his doubts by anticipation; he possesses a consolation, deep and unshaken, amid the changes and impermanence of this earthly life of ours.

7. Since 1662 this psalm has had its place in the burial service of the Prayer-book. In its original intention it was clearly a prayer for living men, that they might be delivered from affliction, and that the work which their hands had been unsuccessfully striving to do should be crowned with the divine favor. Yet there is also a fine propriety about its use at the burial of the dead—not only because it reminds the living, with such tenderness and power, of the transience of all things human, but even more because it opens vistas into that eternal world which knows no defeat and no decay, where all the faithful work of the hands of the dead, and of the living who are yet to die, will be established.

FIFTH DAY: Paraphrase of the Psalm

O Lord! thou hast been our eternal home. Ere mountains or earth were brought forth, thou wert, O God, and thou dost continue from everlasting to everlasting. At thy bidding the frail generations of men return to the dust. Ages are in thy sight but as a day when it is done—brief as a watch in the night. The generations of men are ever changing. They blossom in the morning like the meadow-flower, to wither and perish in the evening.

The sorrow of our life is due to our sin. For this fierce anger of thine, which confounds and destroys us, has been kindled by our transgressions, which, though we ourselves may know them not, are yet plain in thy sight. For under thy sore anger all our days have vanished away. When our years are over, they are but as a murmur. Though they mount to seventy or eighty, yet is their glory but toil and emptiness; for it hastens away, and like a bird we are gone.

O how few there be that lay to heart the meaning of thy fierce anger! Teach us to understand this, and to number our days in the light of this knowledge, that our hearts may reap a harvest of wisdom. O our God! come back to us. How long wilt thou tarry? Have pity upon us, thy servants. After the long night of sorrow, let thy mercy dawn upon us, and be with us all our days, filling our hearts with joy and gladness, as deep as is the sorrow that has been ours in the years gone by. Interpose for thy servants' sake, and manifest thyself in some glorious deed. Set thy favor upon us, O our God, and establish the work we are striving to do.

Explain to yourself every phrase of the psalm in thoroughly modern and unconventional language.

The success of your effort will be best tested by writing a paraphrase of your own.

Sixth Day: Points for Consideration

1. "The curtain of life was for a moment drawn aside, the hangings that wrap us round, and we looked for an instant into the vast and starlit silences, the formless, ancient dark, where a thousand years are but as yesterday, and into which the countless generations of men have marched, one after another. That is a solemn, but hardly a despairing thought; for something is being wrought out in the silence, something of which we may not be conscious, but which is surely there. Could we but lay that cool and mighty thought closer to our spirits! That impenetrable mystery ought to give us courage, to let us rest, as it were, within a mighty arm."—*A. C. Benson,* The Upton Letters, pp. 239 f.

2. "Whether at Naishapur or Babylon,
Whether the Cup with sweet or bitter run,
The Wine of Life keeps oozing drop by drop,
The Leaves of Life keep falling one by one.

"There was the Door to which I found no Key;
There was the Veil through which I might not see;
Some little talk awhile of ME and THEE
There was—and then no more of THEE and ME."
—*Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam.*

How does the general spirit of the *Rubaiyat* differ from that of the psalm?

3. "I have ever been deemed one of Fortune's special favorites; nor will I complain of the course my life has taken. Yet at bottom there has been nothing but work and toil; and I may well say that in my seventy-five years I have never had four weeks of real pleasure."—(*Goethe,* Conversations with Eckermann, 27 Jan'y, 1824.)

4. "I wish to tell you of a thing which brought me no little consolation, in the hope that it may perhaps be able to soften your grief, too. On my way back from Asia, as I was sailing towards Megara from Ægina, I began to look at the places round about. Behind me was Ægina, in front of me Megara, on my right the Piræus, on my left Corinth—cities which once were most flourishing, but are now lying in ruins before the eyes. This is how I began to turn it over in my mind. 'Ah,' thought I, 'shall we puny mortals be angry if one of us perishes or is slain, when so many cities are lying in ruins and death? Restrain yourself, Servius, and remember that you were born mortal.' Believe me, I was not a little strength-

ened by this thought."—From a letter addressed by *Servius Sulpicius* to Cicero on the death of his daughter Tullia.

5. R. G. Moulton calls this psalm a Hymn of Mountain Sunrise. "While its subject is 'Life as a passing Day,' the setting of the thought is the concealed imagery of a mountain sunrise."—(*The Literary Study of the Bible,* pp. 175-177.) Consider this.

6. "Change and decay in all around I see:
O thou who changest not, abide with me."—*H. F. Lyte.*

7. "Nothing less than the sublime thought of God, transcendent yet immanent, can satisfy and hold us, can steady and guide us, as we think of our little, personal lives in the far-reaching stream of history."—*W. C. Selleck,* The New Appreciation of the Bible, p. 241.

Seventh Day: Questions

1. Do you ever look at your life in the light of eternity?

2. Have you ever allowed yourself to be impressed by the inexorable passing of the generations of men?

3. Have you ever solemnly considered how small a place is yours in the universe and in human history, and how certainly and utterly you shall vanish from the memory of men?

4. Do thoughts like these sadden you? Is this their only effect? What difference does the belief in God make?

5. Is human life necessarily and inevitably as pathetic as it is portrayed in this psalm (cf. verse 10)? Is the view of the psalm a Christian view? What is your own view of human life, based upon your observation and experience?

6. Does such a thought as the eternity of God find powerful expression in the New Testament? Are there any important elements in religion more strongly emphasized in the Old Testament than in the New?

7. In what sense may the sorrow and brevity of life be connected with sin?

8. What view of God underlies the psalm?

9. Does the psalm seem to have a special message for you, when read at the burial of the dead? If so, what is that message? Do you really lay it to heart?

STUDY IX

The Ninety-first Psalm

FIRST DAY: The Text of the Psalm

Happy he who dwells in the secret place of the Most High,
And lodges in the shadow of the Almighty,
Who says to Jehovah: "My refuge and my fortress (art thou),
My God, in whom I trust!"

For HE will deliver thee from the fowler's snare,
From the pit of destruction,
With his pinions he will cover thee,
And under his wings thou mayest hide.

Thou needest not fear the terror of the night,
Nor the arrow that flieth by day,
Nor the plague that stalks in the dark,
Nor the pest or the demon of noon.

Though a thousand fall at thy side,
And ten thousand at thy right hand,
Yet it shall not draw nigh unto thee,
For his faithfulness is a shield and a buckler.

Only with thine eyes shalt thou look on,
And see how the wicked are punished,
For THY refuge is Jehovah,
The Most High thou hast made thy home.

Thou shalt not be met by misfortune,
No plague shall come near thy tent:
For he will give his angels charge over thee,
To keep thee in all thy ways.

On their hands they will bear thee up,
Lest thou strike thy foot on a stone,
On serpents and adders shalt thou tread,
And trample on lions and dragons.

"Because" (saith Jehovah) "he has clung to me, I will deliver him;
I will set him (secure) on high, because he knows my name.
When he calls upon me, I will answer him,
In trouble I will be with him.
I will rescue him, and bring him to honor:
With length of days will I satisfy him,
And show him my salvation."

1. Commit the psalm to memory in any version you please.
2. Meditate upon it carefully, and without the aid of books, until you have some adequate idea of it, in detail and as a whole.

Second Day: The Security of the Faithful (Verses 1-8)

1. Optimism surely never took more radiant or exuberant expression than it takes in this psalm. It must have come from a happy heart; apparently, too, from a triumphant life. The sudden change of its personal pronouns makes the psalm, on a first study, seem obscure and abrupt; but the difficulty disappears, when it is recognized that the body of the poem (verses 3-13) is addressed by the poet to the man who trusts his God, in much the same style and spirit as the book of Proverbs occasionally addresses its admonitions and promises to "my son" (cf. Proverbs 5:1; 6:1; 7:1). The first two verses simply announce the general theme—the blessedness of the faithful—expressed in terms of the third person (for "*I* will say" in verse 2, we should probably read "*he* will say"). In the last three verses, Jehovah himself is represented as intervening and confirming the previous promises by a divine oracle. In the liturgical service, the last verses may have been spoken by a priest.

2. The language of the earlier verses is an echo of the times when the peasant lived in continual fear of an assault by robber bands, from which he had to take refuge by hiding in caves of the mountains. Jehovah is as real a defence to the Psalmist as ever cave or fortress had been to a hunted man. Nay, the thought is even friendlier and warmer than that. The second clause of verse 1 calls up the image of home and hospitable shelter: "he spends the night, as it were, beneath the shade of Jehovah's roof" (cf. Gen. 19:8).

3. Through the promises that follow, directly addressed to the man who trusts his God, we get a glimpse of a world thick-set with dangers of every kind; but through that world the man may walk with the assurance that his feet will be kept. His life may be craftily sought, like the life of a bird (cf. Ps. 11:1) by the fowler, but it is watched over by One who is mightier than any fowler. Note that, in accordance with very ancient conceptions, Jehovah is himself pictorially represented as having wings (cf. the connection of cherubs with the ark), beneath which the man who trusts him is safe.

4. Not only is he safe, but delivered from all fear. Night and day, his heart may be at rest; however keen the arrow that flieth by day, however stealthy and awful the terrors that haunt the night, they cannot touch him. Verses 5 and 6 were no doubt more vivid to an ancient reader than they are to us. The arrow is probably not that shot in battle, but rather the burning dart shot by the sun (Ps. 121:6)—sunstroke; and similarly, the terror of the night may

be that curious influence which was supposed to stream from the moon and produce lunacy.

5. But there were more terrible things than these in the shape of pestilence, fever, and contagious disease—those mysterious forces which stalked about, and smote the ancient heart with the superstitious feeling that they were the operation of demons. This was probably the original idea in verse 6; and the Greek version translates the last clause to mean, "the demon of midday." Still more weird to the imagination would be those spirits that did their deadly work by night. It was at night that the first-born of Egypt were smitten (Exodus 12:29), and Sennacherib's Assyrian host (Isaiah 37:36). But when the awful power of pestilence (or war) sweeps men away by the thousand or the ten thousand, the faithful will be untouched, as Israel was untouched by the destroying angel when he passed in the dead of the night through the land of Egypt (Exodus 12:23). Only the wicked would be struck down. The man of faith would not share their doom, however near he was to the victims, but he would see it, and find in it a confirmation of his faith in the divine government of the world. The words of verse 8 more than half reveal a certain satisfaction at the contemplation of the doom of the wicked; it is almost the only verse in this noble psalm which a Christian cannot gladly appropriate (cf., however, verse 7, and first clause of verse 16).

THIRD DAY: The Triumph of the Faithful (Verses 9-16)

1. The man who trusts is safe; he is also fearless; and the reason is, in verse 9 as in verse 1, because he has made God his refuge and his home. If the present text of verse 9 be correct, we must suppose that the first clause is an interruption on the part of the man who is the subject of these precious promises. "For thou"—he breaks in—"art my refuge." This is perhaps a little unnatural. The margin preserves the continuity of the passage, by suggesting an additional word, "Because *thou hast said,* 'Jehovah is my refuge.'" It is simplest of all to read, as in the second clause, "As for thee, Jehovah is *thy* refuge," which is a happy parallel to "thy habitation."

2. No stroke of calamity will fall upon the good man's tent—a word whose background is nomadic life—because God had given his angels charge over him. The divine faithfulness, which in verse 7 was a shield and buckler, is now personified and takes the form of angels—peculiarly striking in this context; these guardian angels are the counterpart of the demons who carry on their deadly work at noonday and at midnight. The world is a battlefield upon which invisible forces contend for the good man's life.

3. But the angels have charge, and they will lift him over the rough places of the way. Oriental roads were often poor and stony, and the feet protected only by sandals; hence the comfort of the thought that on life's uneven way the pilgrim would be saved by unseen angelic powers from stumbling and wounding his weary feet. And that way was beset by dangers worse than stones: there were reptiles and wild beasts upon it—symbols of malicious and powerful opposition. From these, too, the good man will be safe, because he enjoys angelic protection. Nay, not only is he safe from them, but triumphant over them; not only will they not hurt him, but he will be able to hurt and destroy them. He will tread unharmed over the serpents and adders, while mighty lions and dragons he will trample victoriously under foot. His life will be at once secure, fearless, and triumphant.

4. The psalm appropriately closes in solemn oracular words uttered by Jehovah himself, who confirms the previous promises and sets them in a larger light. Because his servant clung to him in love, Jehovah promises to hear his prayer and be with him in distress, to set him on high, secure and out of the reach of his enemies, to grant him long life in this world—an object of ceaseless aspiration for men who had no sure hope of a life beyond the grave—and finally to crown all his kindness to him, by allowing him to look upon and participate in the great Messianic salvation. And all

this, because he knows Jehovah's name, that is, he knows his character—what to call him, how to invoke him, what attitude to maintain towards him—he understands the nature of the religion which he professes, clings in simple faith and love to the God who is his refuge against the demons, the adders, the lions, the dragons, the men who threaten his life. Such is the man whom Jehovah approves, delivers, honors, and saves.

FOURTH DAY: The Message of the Psalm for Us

1. The faith of this psalm is daring beyond all others—so daring that at first one is tempted to wonder whether the Psalmist fully realizes the fearful odds against which faith has always to measure itself. But he knew life as well as God; the world to which he bid defiance was a world whose perils he understood through and through. It was peopled by powerful demons, who haunted every hour of the day and night, by mysterious forces that smote men down by the thousand and ten thousand, by fowlers who were setting snares for innocent lives. Upon its roads were stones over which the weary pilgrim feet might stumble; in its secret places lurked serpents and wild beasts. Yes; if faith here wins a splendid victory, it wins it after looking with frank and careful eyes at the subtle and powerful forces that are everlastingly arrayed against it.

2. It is altogether probable that Jesus nourished his own faith upon the brave and bracing words of this psalm. It was a sublime illustration of the faith, so dear to him, which could overcome the world. Words borrowed from this psalm were thrust upon his mind in the great temptation (Matthew 4:6; Luke 4:10, 11), and, when his disciples returned to him rejoicing that the demons were subject to them, he assured them, in words suggested by this psalm, "Behold, I have given you authority to tread upon serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing shall in anywise hurt you" (Luke 10:19). We cannot wonder that the psalm should have been a favorite of Jesus.

3. First is its sense of security. The man who has God for his refuge and home feels safe. The fowler may lay his snare, but the life for which it is laid is beyond his reach. Demons may lurk in the way; but "he giveth his angels charge over thee." Unseen gracious forces are watching over the life; and nothing can essentially harm the soul that is hid in God.

4. But besides this sense of safety, there is quietness and confidence. "Thou shalt not be afraid." Unquestionably, fear is one of our deadliest enemies; it both destroys our peace and cripples our power of resisting the blows which may fall. And just as unquestionably is fear the result of faithlessness. "God is our refuge and strength, therefore we will not fear" (Ps. 46:1). "In God have I put my trust; I will not be afraid" (Ps. 56:4). This is one of the great lessons of the Bible, verified countless times in experience, that faith in God drives out fear—fear of calamity, of the future, of man. "What can flesh do unto me?" (Ps. 56:4). Nay, the Psalmist did not even fear the demons.

5. Lastly, faith in God makes life not only quiet, but triumphant.

Opposition may be subtle as the serpent or powerful as the dragon, but over it all faith rises victorious. The triumph may not always be obvious to the world, but it is real to the man of faith, and not seldom also such as the world is compelled to acknowledge. "These signs shall accompany them that believe; in my name shall they cast out demons; they shall take up serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall in nowise hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover" (Mark 16:17, 18). These words breathe the same consciousness of immunity and triumph as the psalm.

6. The faith of the psalm is as simple as it is sublime. It is not an intellectual belief, but a passionate personal relationship; it is an attitude of daring but reasonable trust in the most high God. It is the complete and joyful surrender of the individual soul to one whom it can call "My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust."

Fifth Day: Paraphrase of the Psalm

Happy is the man who knows the Almighty and the most high God to be his shelter and his home, and who can say to him with grateful confidence: "Thou art my refuge, my fortress, my God in whom I trust."

For he is mighty to deliver from perils of every kind. He can save thee from snare and deadly pestilence; his sheltering wings can safely cover thee. Thou needest not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flieth by day, nor the plague that stalks in the dark, nor the feverish heat of noonday. Ten thousand of the godless may fall about thee, but the evil shall never touch thee; for Jehovah's faithfulness is to thee as a shield of defence. Thou shalt see with thine eyes how the godless are punished; but that is all. For thou thyself art safe; thou hast made the most high God thy refuge and thy home. No evil shall befall thee; no plague shall come near thy home; for at his bidding the angels preserve thee wherever thou goest, bearing thee up and keeping thee from stumbling on the stony ways. Over all that is strong and cruel and treacherous thou shalt have the dominion. Reptiles and adders, lions and dragons, shalt thou trample under foot.

"All this," saith Jehovah, "I will do for the man who loves me and cares for me. I will deliver and exalt him. When, in his hour of need, he calls me, I will answer and stand by him. I will save him and bring him to honor, and spare him long to see the golden Messianic days."

Explain to yourself every phrase of the psalm in thoroughly modern and unconventional language.

The success of your effort will be best tested by writing a paraphrase of your own.

Sixth Day: Points for Consideration

1. "Taste for the culture of the Renaissance, passion for poetry, worldly success and fame, had weakened the impression of the religious training of Beza's youth. A dangerous illness revived his former feelings. Escaping from the bondage of Egypt, as he called his previous life, he took refuge with Calvin at Geneva. In 1548, when he, for the first time, attended the service of the Reformed Assembly, the congregation was singing Psalm 91, 'Whoso dwelleth under the defence of the Most High, shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.' He never forgot the effect of the words. They supported him in all the difficulties of his subsequent life; they conquered his fears, and gave him courage to meet every danger."—(*Prothero,* The Psalms in Human Life, pp. 185 f.)

2. "Luther sat translating one of the Psalms; he was worn-down with long labour, with sickness, abstinence from food; there rose before him some hideous, indefinable Image, which he took for the Evil One, to forbid his work; Luther started up, with fiend-defiance; flung his ink-stand at the spectre, and it disappeared! The spot still remains there; a curious monument of several things. Any apothecary's apprentice can now tell us what we are to think of this apparition, in a scientific sense; but the man's heart that dare rise defiant, face to face, against Hell itself, can give no higher proof of fearlessness. The thing he will quail before, exists not on this Earth or under it."—(*Carlyle,* Heroes, Lecture IV.)

3. The last verse of the psalm might be illustrated, in a sense deeper than the Psalmist dreamt of, by the experience of Simeon and Anna (Luke 2:25-38). Simeon took the child Jesus in his arms, and said:

> "Now lettest thou thy servant depart, O Lord,
> According to thy word, in peace;
> *For mine eyes have seen thy salvation.*"

4. The great lesson of the psalm is that God is mindful of his own; but we have been taught by Jesus that the application of this truth must not be external or mechanical. Among those who come scathless through danger may be the bad; and among the thousand who fall at thy side may be the good. "Do you imagine," said Jesus, "that those eighteen, who were killed by the fall of the tower in Siloam, were offenders above all the inhabitants of Jerusalem? I tell you, nay." (Luke 13:4, 5.)

5. "I felt that it mattered nothing to God what I knew, what I believed, what abstract propositions I had mastered, what my place,

my influence, might be; all that mattered was that I should turn to him at every moment with perfect confidence and trust."—(*The Gate of Death,* pp. 44 f.)

6. "In almost all these engagements [in China] Colonel Gordon was very much exposed, for he found it necessary, or at least expedient, to be constantly in the front, and often to lead in person. * * * He seemed to bear a charmed life, and never carried any arms, even when foremost in the breach. His only weapon on these occasions was a small cane, with which he used to direct his troops."—(*Andrew Wilson,* Colonel Gordon's Chinese Campaign.)

Yet Gordon knew well that the life of the good man is not always an outward and visible triumph. On the 11th March, 1884, he writes thus to his sister:

"Remember, our Lord did not promise success or peace in this life. He promised tribulation, so if things do not go well after the flesh, he still is faithful. He will do all in love and mercy to me. My part is to submit to his will, however dark it may be."

His brilliant and faithful career was crowned by a violent death in a captured city, which for months he had defended heroically, but in vain. His life strikingly illustrates alike the truth which the psalm emphasizes, and that which it ignores.

SEVENTH DAY: Questions

1. Does your faith in God give you a real sense of security in life?

2. Has your faith ever enabled you to face difficulty or danger without fear?

3. "I will be with him in trouble." The consciousness of the divine presence in trouble was undoubtedly a great fact to the man who wrote these words; is it to you?

4. A young missionary dies of cholera in India. Another is cruelly martyred in China. How do such facts affect our interpretation and appropriation of the psalm?

5. "It is all one. He destroys the innocent and the guilty alike." So said Job (9:22, cf. 21:7-16), in his perplexity and indignation. If you are acquainted with this mood, consider some of the facts which produced it in you. Can you point to other facts, gathered from your own personal observation, experience, or reading, which justify and illustrate the faith of Psalm 91? In which mood—that of Job 9:22 or Ps. 91—are you able to do and to be your best? Is that, then, not the mood worth encouraging?

6. Have you any fear? If so, of what? and why?

STUDY X

The One Hundred and Twenty-sixth Psalm

First Day: The Text of the Psalm

When Jehovah changed the fortunes of Zion,
  Like men that dream were we.
Then was our mouth filled with laughter,
  And our tongue with ringing cries.
Then said they among the nations,
  "Jehovah hath dealt greatly with them."
Jehovah dealt greatly with us;
  We were glad.

O change our fortunes, Jehovah,
  As streams in the south.
They that sow in tears
  Shall reap with ringing cries.
Forth he fares weeping,
  Bearing the seed to scatter;
Home, home he comes with ringing cries,
  With his arm full of sheaves.

1. Commit the psalm to memory in any version you please.
2. Meditate upon it carefully, and without the aid of books, until you have some adequate idea of it, in detail and as a whole.

SECOND DAY: The Joy of Redemption (Verses 1-3)

1. This psalm is one of a little group (120-134) known as the Songs of Ascent. Of this phrase several explanations have been given, the most probable being that they were psalms sung on the *way up* to Jerusalem by the pilgrims who went to celebrate the great festivals of the Jewish church. The phrase has sometimes therefore been not inappropriately rendered The Pilgrim Psalms. Psalm 121, for example—"I will lift up mine eyes to the hills"—may have been sung as they first came within sight of the mountains round about Jerusalem.

2. Though these psalms may have been thus sung by pilgrims, the question of their origin is not thereby settled. Many of them may have been, and no doubt were, written for specific occasions. This psalm, for example, appears to have been written in times of sorrow, when the fortunes of Zion were low, and seed was being scattered upon unpromising fields with tears.

3. But the singers can look back upon brighter days, at the memory of which they rekindle their hope, though that hope shines through tears. What those happy days were, to which they look back so wistfully, we cannot say for certain; for the words rendered in the Authorized Version, "When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion," should almost certainly be rendered, "When Jehovah *changed the fortunes* of Zion." At the same time the redemption which filled their mouth with laughter and their tongue with ringing shouts was, in all probability, their deliverance from the Babylonian captivity. No other event seems large enough to fit the wild joy of the psalm.

4. The singers find it impossible to express that joy. Their deliverance was like a beautiful dream—too good to be true. They speak with the voice of astonished gratitude. The long night of exile had passed, the day of redemption had come. They had reached the holy city and trodden its ancient streets once more. For very joy they could hardly believe their eyes. It was all like a dream. We can fancy them moving wistfully about from point to point, fearful lest they should break the spell, and then bursting into a hymn of praise, when they had assured their weary hearts that the dream was a living fact.

5. Nay, not only is their own mouth filled with laughter and their tongue with singing, but the very heathen are dramatically represented by the poet as acknowledging in Israel's redemption the marvelous interposition of her God. "Jehovah hath dealt greatly with them." That Israel should acknowledge this was but natural; that the heathen should acknowledge it would be peculiarly wel-

come. It would show how conspicuous and undeniable that deliverance was. What the heathen said was always a matter of importance and anxiety to Israel. Any loss of national prestige meant the loss of prestige to her God; and there was no reproach she feared so much as that the heathen should say, "Where is thy God?" (Ps. 42: 3; cf. Numbers 14: 15, 16).

6. The confession that has just fallen from heathen lips is taken up by grateful Israel, and shouted across the hills of Judah: "Jehovah hath dealt greatly with us." This is a simple statement of sober historical fact. In the exile and the deliverance from it, a great divine purpose was being worked out for Israel, and through Israel for the world. The returned exiles could not know all that their God intended by his strange discipline of them, and his still more strange deliverance of them. As they looked back upon it all, they could only compare themselves to dreamers. But they knew that their redemption was real, and that they were happy beyond all imagination; and with that strong, charming simplicity which we have already met so often in our study of the psalms, they say, with a sincerity all the more profound that it is absolutely unadorned, "We were glad."

THIRD DAY: Hope Looks Through Tearful Eyes (Verses 4-6)

1. The transition from verse 3 to verse 4 is peculiarly abrupt. "We were glad. * * * O change our fortunes." They were glad, but clearly they are so now no more. Some scholars consider that the misery, out of the depths of which the Psalmist here prays, fell a long time, perhaps even four centuries, after the exile, redemption from which is celebrated in verses 1-3. But in so short a psalm, that seems hardly probable. Apparently, therefore, we must assume throughout the psalm that the memory of the exile and the restoration is still fresh, and we must bring the psalm down to a few years, perhaps about twenty, after the return.

2. This time would well suit the melancholy and disheartened mood of the last half of the psalm. It was a period of sorrow and disillusionment. The brilliant hopes with which the Jews came back from the land of their captivity had not been realized. They came back to a dismantled city and a ruined temple; and even nature seemed to have conspired with history against them. The land had suffered from a severe drought (Haggai 1:11), which had heightened the misery and the apathy of the people. Their disappointment is reflected in the pathetic words of Haggai (1:9)—they "looked for much, and behold! little."

3. In such a situation, therefore, with daring hopes so rudely crushed, no prayer could be more natural than this: "O change our fortunes, Jehovah, as streams in the south." The south land, or Negeb, is the tract south of Judah stretching towards Egypt. In summer it is mostly barren as the streams are dry; but they fill again with the autumn rains, and vegetation springs up. The singers, whose strength and hope are dried up, pray that they may be refreshed as the south land is refreshed and redeemed by the streams of water—a very suggestive picture.

4. Verse 5 may be a continuation of the prayer: "As for those who sow in tears, may they reap with ringing cries." But it seems better to interpret it as a sublime assertion of faith, which interrupts, rebukes, and answers the despondent prayer just offered. "Those who sow in tears, do reap or shall reap with ringing cries." This principle is clear and sure to faith, and gives sweet comfort amid tears. The efforts of the returned Jews to reorganize their civil and ecclesiastical life, hampered as they were by misfortune and opposition, were like a tearful sowing upon stubborn soil; but they saw the harvest afar off.

5. This touching picture the Psalmist elaborates with great power: the sower goes forth with seed which he sows in tears; he comes back with jubilation, because his arm is full of sheaves. The joy of

the harvest is proverbial, and such is the joy that is evermore set before those who sow in patience and fidelity, though it be also in tears.

Fourth Day: The Message of the Psalm for Us

1. This is one of the most beautiful songs in literature. It traverses swiftly, but in images of surpassing beauty, the strange vicissitudes of human life—its laughter and tears, sorrow and joy, dejection and exaltation, exile and redemption, spring and autumn, the beautiful dream, and the cruel reality; but the sorrow of it all is swallowed up in the lovely vision with which it ends—of the harvesters coming home with shouts of joy, their arms full of sheaves.

2. The men who sang this psalm had passed through an experience of redemption. They knew and confessed that their God had done great things for them; and they were at once humbled, grateful and glad. They moved about as one in a dream, because they could not trust themselves to think that so good a thing was true. And they were so happy that they could find no words to express their joy. Their mouth was filled with laughter, their tongue with ringing shouts; but all they could say was, "We were glad." That is all; but, on the lips of sincere men, that is everything.

3. Have we any such experience of redemption which enables us, even afar off, to appreciate the rapturous joy of the psalm? Have we ever been delivered from anxiety, from disappointment, from defeat, from danger, from oppression, from sorrow, from evil habits, from sin, from death? And if we have, do we acknowledge our Redeemer? and are we grateful and glad for our redemption? and have our sluggish hearts ever been moved to say, "The Lord has done great things for me; I am glad"? And if we have never made such a confession, or known such joy, are we quite sure that we have been redeemed indeed?

4. Again, the psalm reminds us of the duty of hope. Men to whom the dream of redemption has become a fact, may look to the future through eyes blinded by tears; but they see afar off the golden harvest, and to the listening ear the shouts of the merry harvesters are borne back from the future days, as they bring their sheaves, in armfuls, home. In days of disappointment, this is a consolation of which no one can ever allow himself to be robbed who truly believes in God—that no honest effort is ever in vain, that in due time the faithful worker will reap, if he faint not—if not in this world, then in some other. No seed is ever flung from any faithful hand in vain. In God's good time, if not in ours, it will spring up and bear its destined fruit. In this world, sometimes one sows and it is another that reaps; but God is as mindful of the sower as of the reaper, and one day—how far away we know not—he that soweth and he that reapeth shall rejoice together.

Fifth Day: Paraphrase of the Psalm

When Jehovah changed the fortunes of Zion, it seemed like a beautiful dream—too fair to be true. Then we broke into shouts of happy laughter. The very heathen pointed to us as a people whose God had dealt greatly with them; and we ourselves took up the word, "Jehovah hath dealt greatly with us," and we were very glad.

O God, why is it so different now? Change our fortunes again, we beseech thee, as thou dost fill the brooks in the dry south land with streams of autumn rain.

Yea, despite all seeming, I know that thou wilt hear our prayer. Now we sow in sadness, but one day we shall reap with shouts of joy. With tear-stained faces forth we go, bearing the seed to scatter; but in God's good time, we shall surely come home, with our arms full of sheaves.

Explain to yourself every phrase of the psalm in thoroughly modern and unconventional language.

The success of your effort will be best tested by writing a paraphrase of your own.

Sixth Day: Questions and Points for Consideration

1. How do you explain the apparently sudden change of mood in this psalm?

Can you give any other illustration from the Psalter of a similar change? (cf. Ps. 85 and 95.)

Have you ever had a similar experience of your own?

2. Israel had a definite historical experience of redemption in her deliverance from the Babylonian captivity.

Have you any experience of redemption?

From what have you been redeemed, and what have you gained by your redemption?

Has it made you very glad? Does your experience of it enable you to understand the abounding joy of verses 1-3?

Is your redemption so real that others are struck by it?

Is there a sense in which your redemption is incomplete? What do you anticipate from the future?

3. In disappointment are you patient and hopeful?

4. In what sense is it right to live in the future? Is this mood a hindrance or an inspiration to present activity?

5. Can you illustrate, from your own experience or observation or from missionary annals, the following truths:

(*a*) One sows, another reaps;

(*b*) They that sow in tears shall reap in joy?

6. "I know how wicked my heart has been. But I knew you would come back. And to-day, Henry, in the anthem, when they sang it, 'When the Lord turned the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream,' I thought yes, like them that dream—them that dream. And then it went, 'They that sow in tears shall reap in joy; and he that goeth forth and weepeth, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him;' I looked up from the book and saw you. I knew you would come, my dear, and saw the gold sunshine round your head." She smiled an almost wild smile as she looked up at him. * * * "Now—now you are come again, bringing your sheaves with you, my dear." She burst into a wild flood of weeping as she spoke; she laughed and sobbed on the young man's heart, crying out wildly, "bringing your sheaves with you—your sheaves with you!"—(*Thackeray*, Esmond, Book II, ch. vi.)

7. "I remember the morning on which I came out of my room after I had first trusted Christ. I thought the old sun shone a good deal brighter than it ever had before—I thought that it was just smiling upon me; and as I walked out upon Boston Common and heard the birds singing in the trees, I thought they were all singing

a song to me. Do you know, I fell in love with the birds. I had never cared for them before. It seemed to me that I was in love with all creation."—(Moody's account of the effect of his conversion in The Life of D. L. Moody, by *W. R. Moody,* p. 42.)

8. "For three years we had toiled and prayed and taught for this. At the moment when I put the bread and wine into those dark hands, once stained with the blood of Cannibalism, now stretched out to receive and partake the emblems and seals of the Redeemer's love, I had a foretaste of the joy of glory that well nigh broke my heart to pieces. * * * Seven of the new Church members led in prayer to Jesus, a hymn being sung betwixt each. My heart was so full of joy that I could do little else but weep."—(*John G. Paton,* An Autobiography, 2nd part, p. 223.)

PSALMS 1, 11, 23, 39, 48, 49, 52, 90, 91, 126

SEVENTH DAY: Review of the Ten Psalms Studied

1. Has the study of these psalms brought any conscious gain to your spiritual life? If so, in what direction?

2. What is it that gives the psalms their unique place in religious literature?

Mention some of the broad differences between the psalms and a modern hymn-book.

Which hymns, if any, do you think worthy to be compared with the best of the psalms? Give reasons for your opinion.

3. Reconstruct, so far as the material permits it, the Hebrew life which is the background of these psalms.

4. What conception of God underlies these psalms? Is God as real and present to you as the psalmists felt him to be to them?

5. Can you appropriate to yourself the words of Psalm 23? If not, what hinders you?

6. Can you sustain your deepest spiritual life on the psalms, or do you miss in them any element which is supplied by the New Testament? If so, what?

7. What thoughts do these psalms suggest about money, work, faith, hope, joy, persecution, the future?

8. Do the following words come home to you with more power than before you began these studies in the psalms?

(i) On his law doth he meditate day and night.
(ii) Jehovah's throne is in heaven.
(iii) I will fear no evil.
(iv) My hope is in thee.
(v) Beautiful is Mount Zion.
(vi) He will receive me.
(vii) The goodness of God endureth continually.
(viii) Teach us to number our days.
(ix) He will give his angels charge over thee.
(x) We were like them that dream.

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